

The Red Chair Waits



By ALICE MARGARET HUGGINS

WITH DECORATIONS BY JEANYEE WONG

Red Cherry
Wants
to
Be a Pilgrim School

*In Collaboration with Earle Hoyt Battou and
Hugh Laughlin Robinson*

This intriguing novel of China is a perfect book for young people *and* their parents.

It's the delightful story of high-spirited Chien Shu-Lan, whose New Year holiday was spoiled by the nagging thought that no longer could she put off her marriage to young Wu, son of her father's friend. Her parents and Wu's had arranged the betrothal, according to ancient Chinese tradition, when the young people were infants.

But Shu-Lan was a Christian, who taught at the Pilgrim School. She could not bear the thought of marriage to a man who was almost a stranger to her . . . and his occupation was the subject of much whispering in the village.

How she solved her problem, and learned that marriage, even in China, does not necessarily mean drudgery and misery, is told with vigor and subtle humor in this understanding study of a modern Chinese woman. Here is *truly* a book for the whole family to enjoy!

Decorations by Jeanyee Wong

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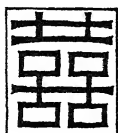
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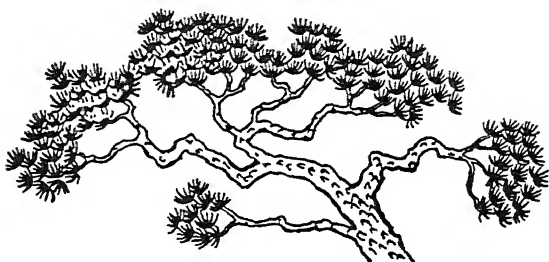
This book was written in collaboration with
EARLE HOIT BALLOU *and* HUGH LAUGHLIN ROBINSON.

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*Perhaps 'tis when the pear trees are in bloom,
Or when the winter roads are deep with snow,
Or when the golden autumn fills the land —
But soon or late th' reluctant bride must go
Forth from her father's gate.*

*The red chair waits.
She weeps. Her lagging footstep hesitates.
Backward she glances long. . . .
'Tis fitting thus; but in her secret heart
May be — a song.*

— Chai Chih-Jui



CHAPTER ONE

CHIEN SHU-LAN FORGOT SHE WAS A SCHOOL-teacher as she placed a small pile of chopped cabbage in the middle of a thin disk of dough, folded it over, and pinched the edges into a tiny dumpling. It was as if the fall semester, when as the dignified "Miss Chien" she had faced the fifth grade of Pilgrim Girls' School, had never been. Now, during the long holidays of the Chinese New Year, she was again the young daughter in her mother's house, trying to match the skill of Sister-in-law, whose dumplings, lined in rows on the wooden chopping board, were every one just a little more nearly perfect than Shu-lan's.

"How do you make them so fast and yet so well?" Shu-lan whispered. "If I hurry, they aren't firm enough to boil without breaking open."

"I could ask you, 'How do you write with a brush pen so fast and yet so well?'" Sister-in-law countered, with some wistfulness, since she had never had any schooling.

"It's just practice." From their manner it was obvious that there was no jealousy between them.

They were both country girls, born here in Lucky Inn Village, about thirty miles northeast of Peking. Shu-lan hardly looked her twenty years. Sister-in-law, who was about twenty-two, looked ten years older. Like other country women, she was dressed in a short blue padded jacket and trousers confined tightly at the ankles with a

black woven band. On her bound feet she wore homemade padded cloth shoes. The girls were of medium height, and of almost the same size, but Shu-lan seemed more slender in her long straight blue student gown. It was her good fortune that she had none of the appearance of a peasant. Her features were delicate and regular, her nose narrow and straight, her mouth small, her dark eyes shaded by long lashes under arched eyebrows. Poor Sister-in-law had a flat square face, with a lump of a nose, and invisible eyebrows. Her hair was not bobbed like Shu-lan's but combed straight back into a knot at the nape of the neck. The corners of her forehead from which, according to custom, the hair had been plucked on her wedding day, accentuated the squareness of her face.

A voice came from the adjoining room. "Come fill my pipe," Mother Chien called.

Sister-in-law dropped the dumpling she was pinching into shape, hastily wiped her hands, hurried to obey.

On the brick bed next to the broad paper windows, her mother-in-law reclined against a pile of folded comforters. She was a colorless woman of between forty and fifty. She looked on while her daughter-in-law filled the tiny bowl of her long-stemmed pipe, handed it to her, and lighted a match. The younger woman served her in respectful silence, her hands quick and sure.

Sister-in-law crossed the room to a table where her husband and father-in-law were sitting on stout, but clumsy stools. After splashing the cool tea from their two half-empty cups on the brick floor, she refilled them. The men did not acknowledge this service, but continued to watch two-year-old Sugarball as she toddled about. Every few moments she ran up to her father or grandfather and never failed to receive a smile or a pat of affection.

Sister-in-law pushed her little daughter gently out of the way, gave a quick glance at the baby sleeping in a roll

of red comforter on the brick bed near the door, and returned to the dumplings.

A few feet away from the two girls Second Brother, perched on another rough stool, crowded as close as he could to the foot-square pane of glass set into the large paper window. He was taking advantage of the extra light it gave, absorbed in reading an English book with the help of a small dictionary.

The whole family was in these two rooms to be near the kitchen's warmth. It was a clear day, early in February, the sun bright, and the branches of trees motionless. The air was sharp outside, but indoors, and dressed in their padded winter clothes, they were warm and comfortable. It was characteristic of the New Year's celebration that the men all had leisure to sit around idly, dressed in their good clothes.

"I wish Fifth Brother didn't have to go," Shu-lan said. Fifth Brother was a pale, fifteen-year-old boy with red-edged eyelids who had been moving restlessly about and now stood by the girls, fascinated by their nimble fingers.

"It's a great time to think of that," he answered. "My baggage roll's all packed and I'm only waiting for a meal of good dumplings before I start to the train."

"But you're so thin," his sister continued. "Even during these two weeks of holidays with all the extra good food we don't seem to have filled you up."

"He might as well finish his apprenticeship. He only has eight months more to go," Big Brother said. "You can't expect him to look hearty when he's shut up in a rug factory ten hours a day."

"I can't do a foot and a quarter in ten hours, not even after all the practice I've had. I work overtime almost every day," Fifth Brother commented.

"Can any of the other boys do it?"

"One or two of them, but most of us have to work overtime until we get our full stint done."

"It won't be long until you begin to get paid," Big Brother encouraged him.

"I'm not sure of getting a job," Fifth Brother answered. "All the apprentices who finished with the old year were let out. Times are too bad to pay workmen, the boss says, when he can just as well get apprentices for no pay besides their food."

At that the father spoke, slowly, as he did everything. "Then you aren't sure of a job after the Eighth Month Feast? But when you entered they told me —" his voice trailed into silence. It was not necessary to say more. The whole family remembered with what bright promises Fifth Brother had gone to the rug factory.

His mother spoke rather sharply. "At least he hasn't cost us anything for his food these three years. He's earned that much anyway, and hasn't been like these students asking every few days for five dollars for books and pens." She had never seen any use in book learning, and had always been more approving of the apprenticeship of Fifth Brother than of the training that her other children were getting in their various schools.

"How would we have got through the year's end without the seventy-five dollars Shu-lan brought home from her teaching, I'd like to know?" her father asked with some spirit.

Hearing him Shu-lan was comforted. Second Brother, because he was a student in Pilgrim Boys' School, might perhaps have guessed — certainly none of the others had any idea — how many times she had felt that economizing had made her lose face. She imagined she had often appeared stingy to other woman teachers, many of whom spent their money on new clothes and all sorts of pleasant things. She had paid her board each month from her

thirty-dollar salary and spent almost nothing else. It had been hard but she had felt she owed it to her father. The thought that her earnings ought to have been her own to spend as she liked would have seemed disloyal to any properly trained Chinese son or daughter. She had not begrudged what she had given her father but she had been disappointed when he accepted it without comment. The day after she had given it to him it had all been spent to pay bills, leaving her father apparently no better off than before and leaving her without a cent to show for her term's work. Her father never wasted words. This commendation before all the family was satisfying.

"We'd have had to sell our stored grain to get cash to pay our bills, and then as soon as New Year was past we'd have had to borrow money to buy at higher prices enough grain to live on until harvest," her father continued. "Thanks to Shu-lan I had the easiest New Year settlement in years. And when her brother begins to earn wages too, it'll be money coming in from education instead of going out."

The mother chose to carry the discussion no farther. She had heard her husband's ideas many times and was not in the least in awe of him or of his sons or of any of their opinions. Because Shu-lan was present her mother did not mention her usual argument: Their daughter had been from infancy engaged to be married and could not be counted on to earn much more money for her own family. Without mentioning it to her husband, the mother had informally promised her close friend and neighbor Mrs. Wu that the marriage to young Wu need not be deferred much longer. A Chinese girl who marries has no further rights nor responsibilities in the home she leaves, but belongs entirely to her new family. After marriage, any money that came into Shu-lan's hands would belong to her husband.

In the kitchen, Shu-lan, hearing her father's plans, could not help being reminded of her engagement. She knew the story. She had been less than a year old, a lively rollypoly baby crawling on the brick bed with her proud young father watching her. Their neighbor, Farmer Wu, had come to discuss the village threshing floor, and having finished his business, had admired the baby.

"We get along the best of any men in this neighborhood," he had said, "let's make our friendship last forever by betrothing your girl to my boy."

Shu-lan's father, usually slow-thinking and slow-speaking, had agreed at once, pleased that he was ensuring happiness for them all. After a time the Wus secured a neighbor to serve formally as middleman, and an assurance from Old Hou the astrologer that the union would be lucky.

Young Wu had gone to school for a few years in the Lucky Inn Village Temple, until tiring of Confucius' wisdom and the old teacher's discipline he had attended less and less regularly. Besides, he had complained that shouting his lessons all day made him so hoarse that what he learned was not worth it. He had become a farmer but often left their few acres entirely to his father while he did odd jobs for someone else. He bought homemade brush brooms and wicker dustpans, woven in spare time in the farm homes, which he took on his bicycle to markets in the surrounding villages, making a small profit on their sale.

When his father had asked him to add his earnings to the small family income, the boy had explained that he earned scarcely enough to keep up his bicycle and buy necessary clothing. His mother had taken his part and to keep peace his easygoing father had let him manage whatever he earned. As a result, young Wu enjoyed more freedom than most young people.

Meanwhile Father Chien had become acquainted with

Pastor Tao at the Christian chapel in New Bridge, the market town, two miles away. This friend urged him to take a stand in support of the new law against foot-binding, and refuse to let his little daughter's feet be bound. After he had won a hard-fought victory over his wife in this break with old village customs, he found it less difficult to take the next step, which was to send her to the Christian primary school at New Bridge. Bright little Shu-lan had won scholarships year after year, making it possible for her to continue her schooling. The Wu parents had not been in favor of so much education for their future daughter-in-law, but since she was in a sense getting something for nothing, they had waited patiently while she spent six years at Pilgrim Girls' School at Tunghsien and three in the senior high school in Peking. When she was invited to teach at the Pilgrim School, Shu-lan had secured her parents' consent and accepted the invitation without consulting her future relatives.

But Shu-lan, a loyal daughter in everything else, was beginning to dislike her betrothal. Recently, as she had worked with Sister-in-law and saw more of what marriage involved, she had begun to recoil from its dreariness. For some months no one had mentioned her engagement. She hoped this meant that the wedding day was still a long way off.

While these thoughts were passing through Shu-lan's mind, her father and his eldest son sipped their tea. The older man had a large awkward body which had done a hard day's work every day year in and year out without illness. Now approaching fifty, he showed his age only in a wrinkled and almost toothless smile.

The son looked much like his father. He too was brown and strong and ready for hard work. He too had always been simple-minded and slow-spoken. His only education had been in the village temple school, but this year he had

been persuaded to spend ten weeks at the Farmers' Winter School at the Rural Service Center. Just before the New Year he had returned home so changed by the things he had learned that the family scarcely knew him. Today he had said nothing except to urge Fifth Brother to finish his apprenticeship with patience, but Shu-lan felt for the first time that he would be on her father's side in any argument between her parents over their children's education.

The topic of Fifth Brother's return to the rug factory had been exhausted. It was too bad to have him go to a place where he grew thinner all the time. Their dissatisfaction with his condition, however, was not strong enough to keep him at home, since he was near the end of his apprenticeship. It would never do to lose all he had put into it, just when he should begin to earn wages as a journeyman rug weaver. Anyone could see that. The conversation lagged.

Sugarball had been running back and forth between the two rooms, chuckling to herself. She was as round as a ball in a little padded jacket and trousers of so bright a red that one could hardly look at her. Her mother, busy from early until late, had nevertheless taken time to paint low on the middle of the child's forehead six round red spots, one in the center and the others in a circle around it, the whole pattern about the size of a five-cent piece. On the tip of her nose was another round dot. Her short black hair had been braided into two pigtails and tied with scarlet yarn. Her chubby cheeks were smeared with rouge and her little thumbnails painted like cherries. And her black eyes sparkled with fun.

Nine-year-old Ninth Brother had been repairing his slingshot. As the conversation began to run out he set himself in the doorway to tease Sugarball, shutting her first into one room and then into the other and allowing her to pass only after a tussle.

"Why don't you take the dog and play in the yard until the dumplings are ready?" Shu-lan suggested.

"Take the dog and play in the yard yourself," Ninth Brother mimicked her voice and continued to plague Sugarball. Each time he made it harder than before until she could not pass by him at all. She was such a jolly little girl that she tried again and again without complaint but finally, exasperated, began to cry.

Her grandmother cried out to her: "Worthless child! Keep still!"

Ninth Brother continued to hold her and laugh at her rage, and she cried all the louder.

Her grandmother got off the brick bed with surprising energy and slapped her two or three times. "Such a noise!" she scolded. Then she said to Ninth Brother, "Let her go." Still laughing, he reluctantly obeyed.

Mother Chien returned to her place on the bed grumbling: "Girl children are noisy. When I had been married as long as that one I already had two sons. Here's my worthless daughter-in-law with only daughters. We haven't a single grandson! Really!"

The remark was plainly audible over Sugarball's sobs. The little girl had run to her mother and throwing her arms around a padded leg had buried her face in her mother's black trousers. Shu-lan glanced out of the corner of her eye. Sister-in-law's face was red, but her fingers flew and she ignored her daughter.

"How can Sister-in-law be so self-controlled?" Shu-lan asked herself, marveling. Sugarball's sobs were more than she could bear. She gave a dumpling a final energetic pinch, wiped her hands, and took the little girl into her arms.

"Let's get a piece of spongecake," Shu-lan whispered into Sugarball's ear. By the time she was ready to eat the first bite, she was laughing again. How sweet she was! Shu-

lan felt deep inside her a physical satisfaction as she held in her arms her good-natured little niece. She pointed at things in the kitchen, calling them by name and persuading Sugarball to repeat them after her. She knew it pleased Sister-in-law to have the child comforted when she dared not do it herself lest she seem to oppose her mother-in-law.

Mother Chien returned to the topic she had introduced.

"Grandson!" she exclaimed. "Really! You'd think a woman who had borne nine sons would have plenty of grandsons by the time she was fifty!"

No one interrupted to remind her that five of her nine sons had died somewhere on the way to maturity and that of the four who survived, one was only a child. It had been the fate of some of her children to be unlucky, and when gods or devils had so decreed, parents, neighbors, and doctors were of course unable to keep them alive. It was fortunate that there were still four sons left: Big Brother, twenty-two; Second Brother, nineteen; Fifth Brother, fifteen; and Ninth Brother, nine. The Chiens had been much luckier in their sons than many parents.

"Look at our family!" Mrs. Chien was saying. "Really! No grandsons, and yet we have a grown son who doesn't want to be married! Fortunately there is such a thing as marriage by proxy, and I say that before another New Year's Day comes around we'll have another daughter-in-law."

Second Brother was sitting motionless, no longer seeing his book.

"You know what I told you, mother. I swear I'll not marry before I'm twenty-five, and you'll only shame any girl you bring here under false pretenses."

"False pretenses!" His mother's voice was shrill. "It'll be legal all right. You'll see what the rest of the village will have to say as to whether it counts as a marriage or not."

Not listening to Mrs. Chien's tirade, Shu-lan and Sister-in-law had been boiling the first kettleful of dumplings. Now these began to puff and float on top of the water, showing the filling through the thin dough. Sister-in-law pushed them about expertly, using the back of her gourd ladle to avoid cutting them open. Then she dipped them out onto a platter for Shu-lan to carry to the other members of the family. Their arrival put an end to Mrs. Chien's complaints, if not to the topic which still hung disagreeably over the family. The older woman and the men were soon sucking in their food with noisy appreciation. But later, while they were waiting for a fresh supply, Big Brother brought the subject up again as though he had been going over it and trying to find a solution.

"Ma, maybe Fifth Brother would like a wife. His head isn't so full of books. If he wanted to marry there wouldn't be any hurry about Second Brother."

A look of relief came into the student's troubled eyes. The mother's face also brightened.

"He's no longer a child," she said. "Really! Soon he will be a master workman."

Fifth Brother ate noisily and tried to appear unconcerned but in his eyes was a sly smile of interest.

When at last the men of the family were satisfied it was time for Fifth Brother to leave for the train, Big Brother shouldered the baggage roll; Second Brother carried the washbasin full of small rattling articles tied up in a square of blue cloth; Ninth Brother and Blackie, the dog, furnished noise. Fifth Brother bowed farewell to his parents. With their hands tucked in their sleeves to keep them warm, the two young women followed him as far as the street and then, bent over and shivering, ran back into the house and began to cook and eat at their leisure the few dumplings that were left.

An hour or so later, Ninth Brother came rushing in,

breathless from running. " Stilt walkers! " he announced, " tomorrow! The Tu family have hired them to come to East Temple. Won't that be fun! " He jumped up and down and let out whoops of joy, while his mother smiled with no complaint about the amount of noise he was making.

Soon the two older brothers returned. They had met acquaintances on the way home from the station and had heard the good news.

" It seems the Tus' grandson nearly died and they promised this celebration to the Goddess of Mercy at East Temple if the child recovered," Big Brother reported.

" We know all about it," his mother told him. " We just hadn't heard the day they were coming. The child was healed by a miracle two days after his grandmother had made the vow."

" Do you think they'll have firecrackers? " Ninth Brother wondered.

" We can only wait and see," his mother answered amiably.

They were all a little like Ninth Brother. They all looked forward eagerly to seeing the stilt walkers.



CHAPTER TWO

THE NEXT MORNING, FOR ONCE, NINTH Brother was up early. Before it was quite light his excited voice could be heard all over the courtyard asking questions. He had hardly been away from the village in all his life, and the little place so seldom enjoyed any entertainment beside weddings and funerals that it was no wonder the boy was in a frenzy of excitement. He demanded his breakfast early for fear he might miss something. His mother consented readily. It only meant that Sister-in-law had to hurry. But there was a gusty little wind and the fire under the big iron kettle refused to burn properly. Ninth Brother stood over Sister-in-law as she squatted before the low stove slowly pushing into it the dry cornstalks which ought to have made a quick hot blaze.

"Ma, she does it on purpose," he scolded. "When did the fire ever act this way if I was only going to the temple to school? It always burns all right when she is hurrying me off to study. Now look at it," he continued, "the smoke nearly puts my eyes out!"

"Then come away until your Sister-in-law gets it going," his mother suggested.

"And let her take all day?" He stamped his foot in anger.

After what seemed a long time her efforts were successful and the corncakes she had made and plastered all over the inside of the iron kettle began to cook. Ninth Brother

kept complaining. He wanted to take the cover off and watch them but since that let out the heat and retarded the process, Sister-in-law kept putting it back on. Finally they looked browned enough to eat and he chose a cake which was barely done.

"Give me that one," he ordered. Not waiting for permission, he grabbed the cake. It burned his mouth and he howled.

"Slowly," said Sister-in-law.

"You're nothing but slow," he answered rudely. After that he cautiously nibbled the edges, but so fast that he finished in record time. When he was ready for his second corncake, several were done to crunchy perfection. He selected one carefully, weighing the advantages of this over the other. Once satisfied however, he charged out of the door with Blackie at his heels, looking for excitement.

"Impatient people are smart," his mother said, proudly quoting a common saying.

Sister-in-law's only response was to quietly close the door he had left open.

One by one the other members of the family appeared. Now that there was no hurry, the fire burned smokelessly, the corncakes were crusty and fragrant, and the morning was different from other mornings only in the pleasant anticipation that the day would later bring special pleasure.

Having eaten, Second Brother was soon lost again in his book. Big Brother put on his little brimless black satin hat and went to call on his friends. Mother Chien smoked her pipe. Father Chien sipped tea. The two young women did the housework while keeping an eye on the children.

Shu-lan, counting the days, discovered that it was Saturday. On Monday she and Second Brother must return to Tunghsien and their holidays would be over. They had been happy restful ones but she was ready for school

again. She would be kept much busier to be sure, but there would be more sense of achievement. After all, even though one worked all day in a home, cooking, cleaning, and sewing, the next day there was just as much cooking and cleaning to be done and perhaps even more sewing. And always, it seemed, at least one in the family was cross. Shu-lan preferred the life of the schoolroom. "If I could do as I liked," she told herself, "I'd never get married at all."

The sun was well up in the sky when they heard the sound of someone at the outer gate of their courtyard. As Second Brother let him in, Shu-lan, peeking through the glass window, was suddenly filled with apprehension.

"You give them tea," she said to Sister-in-law, and slipped behind the padded curtain into her own room before the caller entered the house. Her room was not heated so she took a comforter from the pile on the brick bed, and wrapping herself in it, prepared to stay out of sight.

Meanwhile her father and mother were greeting their caller. He was a man named Sung, fat and pig-eyed, a carter whose two half-grown sons ran all day as donkey drivers. The three of them knew all the gossip for miles around. But little as Shu-lan liked the man's appearance and what she knew of his character, she avoided meeting him for more personal reasons. He was the man the Wus had chosen long ago as middleman and Shu-lan was sure that he could not possibly have come on any other business than arrangements for her wedding. Yet only yesterday she had been rejoicing that everybody seemed to have forgotten it.

Shu-lan could hear Mr. and Mrs. Chien and the carter making all the customary polite remarks necessary at the beginning of a conversation. Then the time came for Mr. Sung to state the real reason for his call. Still he seemed to be only gossiping.

"I hear the date has been set for the wedding of the Wus' third daughter, but such close friends as you probably know all about it," he remarked, knowing well that the business had been settled only the evening before and that he was bringing unexpected news.

"Their second daughter hasn't been married two months," Mr. Chien commented in a tone of some surprise. "And it wasn't a half year earlier that Farmer Wu buried his mother. He borrowed two hundred dollars for that. It'll be hard for him to prepare another dowry so soon. He has few mouths to feed but he has only half as much land as we have, and I happen to know he figured last year's crop would be barely enough to keep them going until next harvest. He didn't know how he was going to pay the interest on his debts." Mr. Chien's sympathy for the father of the family was evident as his slow-spoken words followed his thoughts.

Carter Sung laughed. "It's true that the Wus would rather wait. Third Daughter is a fine housekeeper. Mrs. Wu never has to do a bit of work. They'd like to keep such a useful young woman, but her future mother-in-law, old Mrs. Wang at the Village of Yellow Melon Garden, knows her reputation and she'd like a chance to take life a little easier too. So the Wangs won't wait."

"Really! Mrs. Wu will certainly miss Third Daughter," Mrs. Chien agreed complacently. "I know how she depends on the girl. When's the wedding to be?"

"Old Hou the astrologer has found that the luckiest day for them is the twenty-fifth of the third moon."

Mr. Chien's thoughts continued along the line they had already been going. "Within the next two months he must get together more than a hundred dollars," he murmured, wondering how his friend could do it.

Mrs. Chien was thinking of the women's part in the preparations. "Really! It may be that Third Daughter has

been clever in this too, and has much of her sewing done," she said, "otherwise they'll certainly have to hurry."

The carter's mind went off on no such tangents. "I think you can easily guess what my business here is today. Before their daughter goes out the gate, Mrs. Wu must have someone to fill her place. The mother hasn't done any work for nearly ten years, not since their oldest girl reached her teens. She would find it bitter to begin doing housework again now. She needs a daughter-in-law."

"What? Can he stand the added expense of bringing home a new daughter-in-law?" Mr. Chien gasped in amazement. He was still thinking of financial difficulties.

Mrs. Chien now saw how it all affected her. "It's too short notice," she objected bluntly, her complacency all gone. "We haven't sewed a stitch yet. Really!"

In the other room Shu-lan had stopped breathing. She closed her eyes tightly and then opened them wide. Was she awake? Was this happening? "No!" she gasped in a whisper, refusing to accept what she had heard, and then again, "No!" her voice trembling in little sobs. She covered her mouth with the comforter. She must not be heard.

The middleman was talking cheerfully on. He must have known that the proposal he brought would not be welcomed at first and so he had been prepared to carry on the argument until he should wear down the opposition. Shu-lan heard her mother's objections become milder and fainter. It did not seem possible that they were talking about her, "Miss Chien" of Pilgrim Girls' School, and planning to send her as though she were a horse or a cow to another household to work as the mistress bade her. All her life she had taken for granted that eventually, whenever in fact her parents so decided, she would be married. But now all the independence of spirit and appreciation of the value of human life, which her years at

school had developed, seemed to unite and fill her with rebellion.

"I can't! I can't!" she whispered stubbornly into the comforter.

Finally she heard her father's voice. He was not worrying about where he would get the money for her dowry, though that would be a problem. Characteristically he was carrying another's burden, mentioning the inconveniences to Shu-lan.

"You know our daughter is teaching at her school in Tunghsien. I'm afraid it would be hard for her to get excused so suddenly. She studied on scholarships, and I have heard her say that the school wishes her to repay in work some of what she received."

"Oh, schoolteachers are easy to find," the middleman answered promptly. "There are always plenty of them out of work."

But Shu-lan could not dismiss her responsibility so lightly. On Tuesday classes would begin. She must be there. Even if she had to come home again in a few weeks she could not leave her school in the lurch on opening day. Why, oh why, must this happen to her?

Carter Sung still had something on his mind. He coughed a time or two before he spoke.

"If you've been hearing gossip about the Wus' son I know your friendship for the parents will keep you from listening to it. I thought I'd just mention that none of it is true. He's a fine young man as I'm sure everyone will tell you," the middleman concluded smugly as though he had checked off the last item on his list.

Shu-lan, listening, shivered, perhaps from the cold or perhaps because of the meaning of those last words. Why should Carter Sung think that young Wu's reputation needed bolstering up? What was the gossip? She must ask her brothers. Even though they had never been particu-

larly friendly with young Wu, they could probably learn it from some neighbor. After all, she was the one who would have to live through the years ahead. She must know.

Her father was seeing the carter to the gate with old-fashioned country courtesy. Shu-lan crawled out of her comforter. She heard Ninth Brother's voice outside.

"Come! Come fast! They're already here! Ma! Hurry! I can't wait for you," and he was off again.

Shu-lan's world was black about her. What did she care for stilt walkers? But her mother was off the brick bed in an instant, smoothing her hair before the tiny mirror, pulling her big woolen scarf from behind a box where she had stuffed it. Second Brother had disappeared as soon as he had heard the news and his father had gone with him.

"Come, daughter," Mrs. Chien called breathlessly, as though the only thing anyone could be interested in was the approaching diversion. "Are you ready?"

"I don't want to go," Shu-lan answered listlessly as she appeared from behind the padded curtain to her own room. "Sister-in-law, you go with mother and take Sugarball. I'll watch the baby."

Her mother could not wait for her to finish.

"What nonsense!" she cried. "Don't you start showing a bad temper with me! Get your sweater!"

"Then I'll take Sugarball."

"No, she's too much bother," Mrs. Chien said.

Shu-lan could not explain why it was suddenly so important to have her way about taking her little niece. Disregarding the older woman she caught the child up, put on her pink knitted cap, and started toward the door. And thus they went along the village street, Shu-lan marching ahead with Sugarball, and her mother hurrying along behind on her stumpy bound feet.

The stilt walkers were to be at East Temple, but if she

had not known it Shu-lan would have had no trouble in finding them. Everyone on the street was hurrying toward the east. They heard the beating of drums and cymbals, and then the ringing of small bells. After only a few minutes' walk they saw that a show was already in progress in a big flat space near the temple. Judging from the size of the crowd, people from miles around had come for the fun. By standing on the higher ground on which the village was built, Shu-lan could see over the heads of the crowd. Her mother, not satisfied to be so far from the performers, left her and went nearer. She would not see so well but she would find plenty of friends there and would feel that she was having a larger part in the excitement.

A pair of "lions" was performing, each of them containing two men in its huge yellow cloth body, one to manipulate the head and front legs and the other the hind legs. Shu-lan had never seen anything like them before. They looked more like enormous Pekingese dogs than lions with their papier-mâché heads three feet wide, bulging eyes, shaggy ears, and fearsome teeth. Thin brass bells dangled from their necks and accompanied their antics of jumping, running, stalking about, rolling over, and scratching imaginary fleas. Sometimes they would dash at the crowd in apparent fury, scattering the small boys in a screaming but delighted panic. Ninth Brother was surely in the center of the excitement.

Shu-lan's heart was heavy. Her eyes saw the silly lions, and then the beasts faded and she saw instead a kitchen like theirs at home, except that in it was not Sister-in-law, but herself pushing cornstalks into the fire. She, Shu-lan, was dropping her work to run in answer to the call of a mother-in-law. Into the picture came a memory of her mother's friends playing mah-jongg and teasing Mrs. Wu about her short temper. Shu-lan knew that these same women considered her mother a woman of exceedingly

sweet and mild disposition. But Mrs. Wu's daughter-in-law would have to get up early and go to bed late and all day long she need expect few if any kind words. Chien Shu-lan, trained in chemistry and physics, English, and Western music, as well as Chinese history and literature, could not make dumplings as well as her Sister-in-law. How could she ever fill the place of that peerless housekeeper, the third daughter of the Wus?

The lions danced, their bells ringing in a catchy rhythm. The crowd moved back and forth trying to find places of vantage. A few enterprising peddlers had appeared, balancing poles on their shoulders from the ends of which dangled trays of candy or other small delicacies. Others had long strings of red haws, like overgrown necklaces. The sun shone brightly on as gay a throng as Lucky Inn Village ever saw.

To Sugarball everything was wonderful. Shu-lan soon discovered that the child was not watching the lions at all but was fascinated by a puppy playing about the feet of some young women standing not far away. Shu-lan moved closer to them so that Sugarball could see the puppy better. It jumped and rolled, and the little girl jumped in her aunt's arms and squealed with glee. Shu-lan was not acquainted with the puppy's owners. She was sure they did not live in Lucky Inn Village but had come from some other place near by. They spoke with shrill, rustic voices. She could not help hearing everything they said, naïve comments about the lions, or about some acquaintance whom they saw in the crowd. They were having a marvelous time.

Shu-lan's heart was too sad for such a place, and now Sugarball began to be heavy. Her aunt stood her on the ground but the puppy came running up to make friends with her and looked so big that the child was frightened and had to be picked up again. Just as Shu-lan began to

think she might as well go home she caught words which attracted her attention.

"The younger one's name is Wu and he lives here at Lucky Inn."

The men being discussed were coming by, pushing their bicycles through the crowd. The older one was a slim smooth-looking fellow of thirty-five or forty. Shu-lan gave him hardly a glance. All her interest was directed toward her fiancé. She had not been this near to him for two years or more. She studied him intently to see what sort of a man he was.

"The younger one is not hard to look at," one of the young women was saying.

"But very ordinary-looking," Shu-lan answered in her mind. He was neither tall nor short, fat nor thin, strong nor weak, brown nor pale. He could have been anybody. Shu-lan's eyes, accustomed for years to the alertness and intelligence of students and teachers, saw again but with greater disconcertment the face she had known since childhood, and was impressed by how commonplace and empty it looked.

"He wears good clothes too," the second young woman was commenting appreciatively without regard to whether she might be overheard. "But how does he dare to be seen with that Heroin-selling Chang?" She let her voice fall, and looked around to see who might be listening. Shu-lan was chuckling Sugarball under the chin and smiling as though her one thought was of her chubby niece. Her ears nevertheless caught every word of the answer spoken in a stage whisper.

"My brother says this Wu has begun to help Chang in his business — who knows?"

The two men were lost in the crowd. Shu-lan turned and trudged toward home. She no longer noticed the sunshine and the blue sky. Instead, she saw the dirty narrow

street with dry mud walls on both sides, and trees bare and lifeless. There was no color anywhere — only the gray-brown of the earth, and not a person in sight, nor even a dog. How cold it was!

In less than five minutes she was home again.

"Sister-in-law, go quickly. The lions were still performing when I left. The stilt walkers hadn't begun. You can see it all."

"You shouldn't have come back —" Sister-in-law began.

Shu-lan's only answer was to look straight into her eyes.

"I know," Sister-in-law's lips barely moved. It was not necessary to say more. The two girls had always liked each other. Since Carter Sung's visit there was a new sympathy between them. They stood in silence a moment.

"But hurry!" Shu-lan jerked off her own sweater and put it around the other's shoulders. "And leave Sugar-ball with me. She's heavy to carry and she's seen enough anyway."

So with considerable urging and a little actual pushing she overcame Sister-in-law's conscience and got her out of the house for an unaccustomed outing without the burden of a child or two.

Alone, at first Shu-lan sat dully on the edge of the brick bed and tried to adjust herself to what had so suddenly threatened to change her life. Yet the only thing that was new was what she had just overheard about young Wu, and perhaps Carter Sung was right and it was only gossip. The rest of the prospect which so dismayed her had been ahead of her all the time and she had willfully disregarded it. What was required of her was to go on and perform the duty which was plain before her.

"But how can I? How can I?" she asked aloud, in agony.

Just then the roll of red comforter on the brick bed

near the door gave a convulsive jump as if trying to burst open and from it came a lusty yell. Lotus Bud was announcing that she was awake. When her aunt bent over her she gurgled and cooed with delight. Shu-lan picked her up and sat again on the edge of the brick bed, talking to her.

"I'm never going to let your parents settle your engagement till you're a great big young lady," she promised the baby fiercely and hugged her tightly as if she could keep her safe. Lotus Bud laughed and made funny noises with her pretty mouth.

"Nor Sugarball's either," Shu-lan added. Ever since the child had come home she had been playing happily by herself with some little tin cups and saucers her father had brought from Tunghsien. Now she carried them to Shu-lan and held up a cup for her aunt to play at drinking tea as she had done many times. Both of the children were so dear and each so eager for Shu-lan's attention that her mind was diverted from her own troubles, soothed and quieted by the pleasure of watching their play.

So the time passed faster than she could have believed till she was called to open the gate for Sister-in-law. Her face was rosy with the cold. "I saw my mother and my two younger sisters," she confided to Shu-lan. Her eyes were bright with enjoyment of stolen pleasure taken without her mother-in-law's permission. Then in a few minutes the others came, well-pleased with the entertainment and the friends they had seen. Father Chien carried something tied in his handkerchief, and soon produced eighteen or twenty sesame-covered cakes he had bought from a peddler. Last of all, half an hour later, came Ninth Brother. He had lingered until the stilt walkers had put away their equipment and become ordinary mortals again.

"I'm going to have stilts and learn to walk on them," he announced almost as soon as he was inside the house.

"I saw some small boys in Tunghsien playing on stilts," Big Brother told him. "The stilts weren't quite like these, however. Maybe we could make you some. Instead of being tied to their feet more than three feet up in the air the way those were today, the boys' stilts had little shelves only about a foot from the ground, but were long enough so they could reach the tops and manage them with their hands."

"I don't want any baby stilts. I want some three feet high," Ninth Brother answered unimpressed by Big Brother's interest. "I'll make them myself tomorrow."

Their mother stopped the conversation. She spoke in a coaxing tone. "Little Ninth mustn't plan to have stilts of any kind. It's too dangerous. I'd be afraid he'd hurt himself."

Ninth Brother either knew from experience that his present plan was going to be hopeless, or thought best to wait for a more auspicious moment. He said no more about it but made his legs stiff as if they were stilts and stamped up and down the room, pounding on a washbasin with one of Sugarball's tin dishes in imitation of the gong and cymbals with which the stilt walkers had accompanied themselves. Finally he went out into the kitchen where Sister-in-law was busy cooking.

Like many North China families, the Chiens ate two meals a day, the second one at about four o'clock in the afternoon. Sister-in-law was preparing the big iron kettle full of millet porridge mixed with yellow beans. They would eat this with salty pickled turnip to give it flavor and with the sesame-covered cakes Father Chien had bought. An appetizing odor filled the rooms when Sister-in-law uncovered the kettle to stir the bubbling millet with a rude ladle made of a piece of gourd attached to a bamboo handle. The porridge was ready to eat and she began to dip it into shallow earthenware rice bowls. Two

of these she carried first to the parents who seated themselves at the table. When she started to serve the two oldest sons, Ninth Brother with an empty bowl in his hand tried to grab the ladle.

"Don't bother her," Big Brother called from the other room. It was surprising to hear him interfere on behalf of his wife. This was plainly a new attitude since he had attended the farmers' school.

The boy only laughed and began to joggle her elbow.

Big Brother started toward the kitchen. "I tell you to stop that," he said sternly.

But he was too late. Ninth Brother had caused Sister-in-law to spill a ladle full of the boiling porridge over her left hand that held the bowl. Shu-lan jumped up to help her wipe it off. Sugarball, terrified by seeing her mother in trouble, ran and clung to her, hindering their hurried efforts.

"You spoiled brat! Addled egg!" Big Brother yelled and slapped little Ninth as hard as he could.

Ninth Brother, taken aback at seeing how his fun had turned out, began to bellow. He ducked his head, and his shoulders were so well padded in his winter clothes that he scarcely felt his brother's blow.

The old lady came as fast as her bound feet would let her, shouting: "Don't hit him! Don't hit him!" She ran between her sons and shielding Ninth Brother led him into the other room.

"Mother's precious! Don't cry! My baby boy!" She sat on the edge of the brick bed and drew him down beside her, petting and coddling him. While she fondled her sobbing favorite, she began to scold the others all of whom were watching Shu-lan's attempts to care for Sister-in-law's burn.

"She ought to have served him first when he was so

hungry from being out in the cold all afternoon. Then she wouldn't have burned herself," Mrs. Chien's voice rose above the tumult. "She's always picking on little Ninth. She's jealous because her children are girls. Don't cry, precious!" she urged the small boy.

Stroking little Ninth's head, she looked reproachfully at Big Brother. "If I were not here, no one can say what he'd have to suffer, and from his own brother too. *Ai yu!*"

She said the same things over and over until finally her words became a series of exclamations in which she actually appeared to be in pain. All the family tensely busied themselves with this or that, not daring to interrupt her tirade but hoping that she would soon talk it out.

Suddenly she was silent a moment, then screamed hoarsely: "*Ai ya!* My body sweats cold! If I die, it's my eldest son's fault!" She threw herself back against the comforters piled on the bed, her breath coming in sobbing gasps.

For an instant, all stood in bewildered uncertainty. Then Shu-lan left Sister-in-law to attend to her own burns, rushed to her mother, and began rubbing her hands and arms.

Big Brother stood in the doorway, looking first at Sister-in-law in the kitchen and then at his mother in the next room. Since he had been married he had never once tried to take the part of his wife against an injustice. Now seeing the disaster brought about by his first attempt, he was filled with distress.

"Second Brother," Shu-lan called, when her efforts brought no success, "run and get Mrs. Wang next door. Perhaps she'll know what to do." He was gone while she was still speaking.

Farmer Chien seated himself by the table, nervously jiggling one knee up and down, and, plainly alarmed, he

watched his daughter hovering ineffectually over his wife. Ninth Brother went and stood by him with wide eyes, subdued for once.

In a few minutes Mrs. Wang came bustling in, delighted at the prospect of finding out about the family fracas, of which, as next-door neighbor she had overheard enough to pique her curiosity. This would furnish her material for gossip and a chance to impress the neighbors with her importance. She seemed to know exactly what to do. Having got rid of the menfolk she had Shu-lan help her settle Mrs. Chien on the brick bed, and then skillfully pinched her patient's forehead and chest until marks showed in dark red rows.

"Now we'll keep her quiet," she said, "and she'll be better very soon. Her anger has escaped, and so she will recover more easily than if it had become a stone in her vitals. I'll sit right here and watch."

If that was all the further care that was needed, Shu-lan was sure that she could manage it and need not inconvenience Mrs. Wang any more, especially as it was already mealtime. With excessive courtesy on both sides Shu-lan thanked her neighbor and tried to get rid of her now that her usefulness was over, while Mrs. Wang tried to stay, her hour of importance seeming all too brief. In the midst of the polite argument, Mrs. Chien opened her eyes, and after a few minutes professed to feel better. She weakly added her thanks to Shu-lan's and Mrs. Wang, having given of her skill, had to go away without having secured anything like a complete story of all that had happened. Taciturn Second Brother, when he had gone to call her, had said very little.

Shu-lan sat till twilight by her mother's side keeping her company while the older woman dozed. Now that her mother was better, her thoughts returned to her own affairs. Less than two months! She knew with certainty that

to be the sort of daughter-in-law that Mrs. Wu would demand was for her an impossible undertaking. And what about young Wu? Now that she was breaking the habit of years and was making herself try to picture him as her husband, her spirits sank lower and lower. She was so sick at heart that it made her feel actually ill.

“How can I?” she kept asking. There was no answer.



CHAPTER THREE

WHEN SUNDAY MORNING BROUGHT ANOTHER bright sunny day, Shu-lan said to her father: "Today I'm surely going to church. I've missed every Sunday of this vacation for one reason or another so today nothing is going to keep me at home."

Her father's face looked troubled. "You know the new preacher —" he began.

"No, I don't know him and that's what makes it all the worse. What must he think of a member who's away nine months in the year and then doesn't attend when she's here?"

Of the whole family only Shu-lan and her father were Christians. About ten years before Mr. Chien had become acquainted with Pastor Tao, an unusually fine earnest worker who had been at that time the minister of the little church at the nearest market town, New Bridge, two miles away. Mr. Chien had formed the habit of stopping at the chapel to talk whenever business took him into town. What he had heard there had sounded reasonable and right to him, and in spite of some opposition from his wife, he had become a loyal member of the little group of Christians. Quite independently Shu-lan had grown into the Christian faith at the schools she had attended, and had come home to join the church to which her father belonged. Mr. Chien had frequently tried haltingly to explain to other members of the family the new

belief which he had found good and to persuade them also to accept it, but had always been checked by their indifference. Even Second Brother had attended a Christian boys' school without giving conscious consent to the religious principles he had absorbed.

So on this February morning both father and daughter were surprised when Big Brother said: "I'll go too. I went every Sunday at Tunghsien and was amazed how well I liked it."

"Good!" cried Shu-lan, her face bright with pleasure. Then her smile disappeared and she became more troubled than her father had been. "Oh, but brother! Our service in the chapel here isn't a bit like the one at Tunghsien. There they have an organ and a choir and the best preachers to be found anywhere. But here —" She did not attempt to describe it.

"Nevertheless this is where I live," Big Brother answered, "and if I'm to go to church at all, this is where I shall have to go. If it's good enough for you and father, it's good enough for me."

The men were eating their morning meal as they talked and Shu-lan was helping serve them. Sister-in-law's burned hand was blistered and painful but the family must be fed just the same. Mrs. Chien claimed that she felt too ill to get off the bed and wanted no breakfast, but when the food was taken to her she ate heartily. Shu-lan was able, by hurrying, to finish most of the morning's work before the time came when the three of them needed to start on their two-mile walk to the chapel.

After leaving the village, their way lay across the fields, frozen and bare, dotted here and there by groups of low round pointed mounds. These marked the graves of past generations, buried, as was fitting, in the luckiest portions of the fields belonging to each family. Every last bit of every crop had been gathered, even the stubble and roots

being saved for fuel, and only the grave mounds broke the flat monotony of the bare brown fields.

The father led the way single file, and Shu-lan brought up the rear. They followed narrow foot paths which sometimes ran along beside the roads but often cut across the fields. Some of them had been planted with wheat and were waiting for the precious spring rain "more valuable than oil" as the proverb puts it.

To both right and left at a distance were villages, gray mud walls with bare trees rising above them. Such other trees as could be seen were guarding more pretentious family burial grounds. About halfway to New Bridge the Chiens passed a grove of a dozen or more beautiful white pines with ancient gnarled branches, growing in such a family cemetery. Not far from them was a great white stone tortoise, supporting on its back a perpendicular block of marble with a long carved inscription commemorating the life of a virtuous widow of long ago who had reared her husband's sons to become scholars and mandarins.

To the Chiens these were only familiar landmarks indicating how far they were on their way. The air was cold and fresh. The men, used to farm work, walked almost too fast for Shu-lan. Finally they came to a place where the path ran side by side with a cart track and she found the opportunity she had been seeking and could never have made at home—a chance to talk to Big Brother alone. She ran a few steps and changed over to the cart road.

"Brother," she called when she was nearly abreast with him, "I want to ask you something." Her topic was a hard one for a girl to mention, but she could feel that her brother's silence was sympathetic as he waited for her to continue. "Yesterday I heard something that worries me. Do you know what the Wus' eldest son is doing?"

The young man hesitated a moment and then said, "Isn't he buying and selling brooms and dustpans?"

"Yesterday he was with an older man whom I heard a girl call 'Heroin-selling Chang.' Do you know him?"

"Likely there is such a man in New Bridge. I don't know him."

"Please, brother, tell me what you do know. Think what it means to me!"

Her brother hesitated again. "How can I tell you? And anyway, perhaps it isn't true." He stopped speaking but after he had walked a little way, he went on. "At Farmers' Winter School one day I heard the two men who were there from New Bridge talking about Chang. You see one of our courses was about improving conditions in our own villages and they said the worst thing that's going on anywhere in these parts is this Chang's heroin business. They said it's growing faster than anyone could believe. He gets young fellows with bicycles to distribute the stuff and pays them partly in money and partly in heroin so that most of them are tempted sooner or later to take a little. If they do, they're done for. They might as well be called slaves from that day on."

"And that's what the Wus' son is getting mixed up in!" Shu-lan exclaimed, aghast.

"They mentioned him as one of Chang's tools. There are more than ten of them. You see it's easy for young Wu. At least this is what they figured out. He's had his broom business and he decided that when he added heroin nobody would suspect. But soon after he was first seen with Chang, people began to notice that Wu was better dressed than he used to be, so instead of their not catching on to anything, they've spread all kinds of stories which they may have only imagined and may not be true — yet."

"But if he's once started —"

"Yes, that's it. If he's started working for Chang it's

twelve parts out of ten certain that he won't have sense enough to pull out in time. He'll think he can quit Chang any time, but he'll be greedy enough to want just a little more money first, and before he knows it, it'll be too late."

"*Ai ya!* If it's true!" Shu-lan sighed.

"Besides, since the traffic is illegal, if he gets caught with even a small supply of the 'white powder' on him, he'll pay by going to jail, if not worse."

Shu-lan hurried to keep up with her brother while she pondered on what she had just heard. She could be sure he knew of the middleman's visit. Though he had been absent when Mr. Sung called, Sister-in-law would have reported the whole affair to him when she found a chance. She would have told him also that Old Hou, the astrologer, had been commissioned by the Wus to choose a lucky date for Shu-lan's wedding within the next two months. Big Brother's telling her this about her fiancé strengthened her belief in the truth of the disturbing remark she had overheard the day before but had been unwilling to accept. Yet in spite of the fact that he knew all these things, he had given no advice.

"What can be done!" she exclaimed rather than asked.

"It's not easy," was all he answered.

The path here merged with the cart track wide enough so that all three could walk abreast. Their father gave no indication as to whether he had heard their conversation or whether, as was more likely, walking on ahead he had failed to take it in.

"The new preacher is different from Pastor Tao," he now said slowly.

"What's his name?" his son asked.

"Mr. Lang. He and his wife have money of their own and offered to come here without salary. We'd been without a preacher for more than a year after Pastor Tao left,

and we wanted a leader. This looked like such a bargain! " Mr. Chien sighed and was silent.

" Why isn't it? " Shu-lan asked. She was so full of her own troubles, especially this latest information about young Wu, that she cared little at the moment. But apparently her father was unhappy about it. It would do him good to talk.

" I think you'll easily see," he answered. " They've been here only three months but things are different. The words they say are often the same but they don't mean the same." He sighed again. " And there's a Mrs. Lo who came with them. She has money to loan and lives off the interest. I suppose it's natural that she should want as high a rate as she can get, but it's not merciful to charge poor people ten per cent a month for no other reason than that they have little to offer as guarantee. Some people say that part of the money she manages is the preacher's. It doesn't fit with what we learned from Pastor Tao. But I mustn't complain. I have no learning. I only say it's different."

Mr. Chien was a man of few words. To have said this much all at once could only mean that he was truly deeply disturbed about what was happening at his church.

The road they were following was wider now. They were approaching New Bridge. Outside the gate of the town were half a dozen small boys flying kites. A few pedestrians were coming and going. Two men on bicycles passed. They next met a big, heavy, two-wheeled farm cart with women and children wrapped in comforters to keep warm. As soon as they were inside the wall of New Bridge, they could see people all along the street doing their morning shopping, carrying home a scrap of meat dangling from a string, or a bottle containing just enough sesame oil for the day's cooking. Close by the roadside two

women with bound feet worked at a hand mill, pushing the heavy upper stone, by a horizontal wooden handle, round and round upon the stationary lower one while they swept the unground corn toward the center with a worn coarse brush. They passed a little girl of seven or eight carefully carrying a shallow bowl more than half full of dark brown bean sauce from a food shop. The two men remarked how empty the street was that day as compared to market days.

Walking thus amidst the common sights of the main street the Chiens soon arrived at the Gospel Hall, which they entered through a gatehouse. Here at almost any time of day someone could be found drinking tea. Now because it was nearly time for the main Sunday service, the place was full of men enjoying the greatest opportunity for sociability available during the whole week.

Mr. Chien and Big Brother joined this group while Shu-lan, looking neither to right nor left but keeping her eyes fixed properly straight ahead, walked quietly on into the chapel. She sat down on one of the narrow backless benches at the rear of a small section near the stove, where the women were gathering.

The room in which she had often worshiped and where she had hoped to find peace today was no longer as she had known it, restful in unadorned and austere simplicity. On the side walls hung large colored pictures depicting dramatic stories from the Bible. The gaudy colors had not always been accurately applied in the printing, so that many of the pictures were blurred. Across the front of the room, almost from the ceiling, was hung horizontally a red cloth banner to which a Bible text was attached in gilt-paper words more than a foot high. Centered under it was another cheap colored print of the Crucifixion. Seeing all this for the first time, Shu-lan was shocked. No wonder her father had kept saying it was "different."

Nor was the room quiet. She had thought that here as many times in the past she would find a peaceful place to think and pray and that perhaps in this familiar sanctuary her problems would be more easily solved. But the half-dozen women present were carrying on loud conversations. Shu-lan did not know any of them. They were not from Lucky Inn Village where she was the only woman who was a Christian. As in many small-town churches in North China, the members at New Bridge were almost all men; their wives, conservative in religion as in custom, were either indifferent or antagonistic toward this new, and to them, foreign faith.

In about five minutes a gong sounded outside and the rest of the congregation came in. All but a small part of the little room was reserved for men, and they filled it well. As they were finding seats, three schoolgirls arrived and one or two more women. Just as the service was beginning a young mother with a little child hurried in and sat on the end of the bench by Shu-lan.

The minister was a thin man, a little past middle age, with horn-rimmed spectacles. In a sonorous voice he announced the first hymn. Shu-lan had taken her tiny Testament and hymnbook from the inside pocket of her padded coat. She discovered however that they sang not from the hymnal but from charts hanging on a frame in the front of the room. The hymns were new to her. The congregation sang energetically, with no accompaniment, the men's voices not always agreeing on the tune but keeping lustily to the rhythm.

After the opening hymn, the service continued in a way to which Shu-lan was accustomed. When it came time for the pastoral prayer, Mr. Lang reverently removed his spectacles before addressing the Lord. But his change to a strange, high-pitched voice, quite different from ordinary speech, startled Shu-lan. Almost at once interruptions be-

gan to come from the congregation: "Amen!" "Praise the Lord!" Never having heard anything of the kind, Shu-lan's attention was distracted from the meaning of what he was saying, and she found it hard to feel that she was praying. When his long supplication ended, instead of being exalted and sustained, Shu-lan was only weary and depressed.

The sermon followed. Like the prayer, it was punctuated by exclamations of religious fervor from the congregation. Shu-lan found them disconcerting, as though someone were misbehaving in school, shouting when someone else was trying to recite.

The young mother next to Shu-lan had paid no attention to any part of the service but sat and looked about her or played with her child. He was about the size of Sugarball, dressed gaily in red padded trousers and a jacket of magenta with big yellow flowers. Behind, he wore a sort of padded blue apron from his waist to his heels and in front a large dark-blue cotton bib covered with white hand-embroidered patterns. On top of his shaven head was a red-and-green velvet jockey cap with a huge visor. Nothing about him was clean. He stood on the floor, resting against his mother's padded knees and using the front of her short jacket as a table. She had bits of food tied up in a big handkerchief and took them out one at a time, tying the handkerchief securely after each raid. By the time the sermon was half over, he had consumed quite a quantity of peanuts, cracking the shells with his sharp little teeth, and throwing them nonchalantly on the brick floor.

Shu-lan was disgusted with herself. The little boy was not at all attractive to her and yet she had paid attention to everything he did. She, a graduate of senior middle school and now a teacher, try as hard as she might, was unable to ignore the child and concentrate on the sermon.

She found herself thinking about her troubles. In her mind the proposed marriage promised nothing but unhappiness for her and she wished she could put it off as long as possible. "But perhaps I'm just being selfish," she thought. "It's my rightful duty, and I'll just have to face it as bravely as I can." Her parents thought so, and Big Brother had no other idea. Would she never find peace of mind until she ceased to struggle? Apparently not. "It's my own fault that I have to adjust my life so suddenly to marriage. I ought to have prepared long ago, instead of going my own way and thinking only of school. I must simply make up my mind that it can't be put off and get ready now."

Having reached this obviously reasonable conclusion she sat with lips firmly set. Her mind was made up. She brought her attention back to the preacher.

Barely a minute later she was dismayed to find that she was again thinking about her problems, wondering about young Wu's heroin business and fearing all it implied. Her sober reasoning of a moment ago had not brought genuine conviction. Again she was trying to find a way to avoid the prospect which she hated as heartily as ever. It was as if in a piece of music the harmonies had led up to a cadence and then had ended unexpectedly with an unresolved chord.

"I just can't do it," said a stubborn voice within.

By now the service was coming to an end. Immediately after it was over the women were herded through a side door by a tiny woman who made up in determination what she lacked in size. Once in the smaller room adjoining, this little woman greeted each by name.

When she came to Shu-lan, she said, "I'm Mrs. Lang, and I'm sure you must be Miss Chien." Her mouth smiled while her eyes gave Shu-lan an appraising look. "This is Mrs. Lo." She introduced the large woman from the

front seat. Shu-lan, acknowledging these introductions by whatever polite phrases courtesy demanded, remembered her father's sighs.

Tea was being served as a short preliminary to a women's meeting. Shu-lan had failed to ask her father if he planned to visit long with the other men after church. As she knew none of the women in the room and wanted to go home anyway, she slipped quietly out into the empty chapel and walked quickly through the room where the men were drinking tea. By the time she had reached the street door her father and brother had joined her.

Outside, on both sides of the door sunning themselves against the walls of the chapel, was a row of peddlers talking and joking among themselves. Their persimmons, salty crullers, peanuts, and candy were sure to find a few sales as the congregation came out of church. But the Chiens passed them by.

When they had reached a place where the street was empty, Shu-lan said: "Father, just now as I came out of the chapel I thought I saw your friend Mr. Wu. Has he become a Christian?"

"Well, yes," her father answered. "He is one of the preacher's new friends and has become a leading member already."

"I thought he looked a little shabby," Shu-lan remarked, recalling what a contrast in appearance there was between the father and the elder son of the Wu family.

"He's finding it hard to get along these days, I fear," Mr. Chien answered. "You'd think that he and I'd be better friends now that he's in the church, but I seldom see him nowadays." He paused and then added, "I sometimes wonder if he has borrowed money from the preacher and so has to sing and pray louder than other people."

"What about his wife, and — and their children? Do

they come to church?" Shu-lan managed to ask one of the questions which were uppermost in her mind.

"None of them have anything to do with it," her father answered. Then after a little he added: "I can't get used to this new preacher. He doesn't talk so clearly as Pastor Tao. He gets excited and what he says is hard to understand. Like today! Sometimes he says what we ought to do but he doesn't tell us how. My learning is too shallow," he ended sadly.

"It wasn't like winter school," Big Brother conceded, "and I can't say I liked it so well."

Shu-lan did not want to confess how completely empty and futile the morning service had been to her. It might have been her own fault.

"I'm awfully happy you made a start at the winter school," she said. "What you learn there is much more practical than what Mr. Lang said this morning."

"Yes," Big Brother answered, smiling. "We heard about how to live and not so much about heaven, if that's what you mean."

"Fortunately you can read, so you don't have to depend on someone else's interpretation. How would it be for you to read aloud to father? Then maybe he can explain some things you won't understand. And, if you want to, you can manage to let Sister-in-law listen to both of you and get some of it too. You know how mother will never let me teach her anything, but she can't stop you so easily." Shu-lan hoped that her mention of his wife was a happy suggestion, and was pleased that his face brightened when he heard it.

"Then next year, father," she added, "you'll let Big Brother go again to winter school. Don't you think so?"

"As he likes," their father agreed. "I think it's been good for him."

"Oh, yes! Someway I've been counting on going every

year. I suppose it seems to you that I haven't talked about anything else since I came home, but I haven't told you half of the new ideas I got. It isn't just a matter of having better seeds and chickens. Anybody can see why that will pay. But 'living' is one of their favorite words at the Rural Service Center. They had the school organized like any old-fashioned village with a headman and elders. Then they showed us how to add a lot of things we've never had in a place like Lucky Inn — committees for public health, education, amusements, and so on. We students ran a real church and a school and a co-operative society where we bought and sold things. That 'co-op' is something I thought we could start here right away, or at least as soon as we begin to have more eggs to sell. I've been talking to Liu the Second and Tang the Fifth — if I can get them to go with me to winter school next year, we might be able to start some new things in our village here and not just continue to drag along the way our ancestors did."

Mr. Chien made no comment. Shu-lan, happy in her brother's fresh enthusiasm, answered that it was "interesting."

"Interesting!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know there was anything like it! Perhaps your schools are all like that, but when I was a boy and went to the temple school I just memorized Confucius' sayings. In ten years I can't learn all they have to teach at the center."

"It's nice our home's so near," Shu-lan said. "You can go over on your bicycle any time. Second Brother and I'll like getting news from home too." Was she forgetting that soon she would not be at Tunghsien, but cooking, washing, and sewing for the Wu family?

The three of them were walking briskly along, outside the wall of the town now, and back on the narrow paths by which they had come. It was cold but sunny. Father

and son exchanged a remark or two about the wheat in a field they passed. But going single file made conversation difficult.

It was toward the middle of the short winter afternoon when Ninth Brother let them into the yard. They entered to find that Mrs. Chien and three of her friends were happily engaged in a game of mah-jongg. Hearing them, Mr. Chien followed his son into the small house on the east side of the walled yard, to which Sugarball and Lotus Bud had been banished to get them out of their grandmother's way.

Shu-lan went in to greet the ladies and found that, as she expected, Mrs. Wu was one of them. Mrs. Chien gave no sign of her recent indisposition. She was winning and feeling good-natured. They were all so intent on their game that they paid no attention when Shu-lan immediately left again. Even with nothing said about it, she could not bear to be in the room with her future mother-in-law. She went into her own room, and in the cold, packed her things to take back to school the next day.

After an hour or more there was a lull in the game and the four women began laughing and teasing each other noisily.

One of them said to Mrs. Wu, "I hear that your daughter is leaving you."

"They all do sooner or later," she answered.

Shu-lan heard another voice, "But Mrs. Wu has sons and can get daughters-in-law."

"And a much more clever one than any of my stupid girls," Mrs. Wu said politely. She must have given some indication her reply had a connection with the Chiens, for Shu-lan heard her mother making deprecatory remarks about her. The two women laughed genteelly, each disparaging her own daughter.

"I always say," Mrs. Chien added, "that boys can look

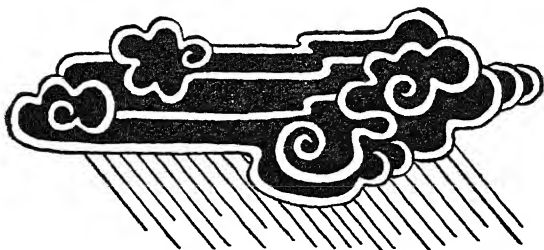
out for themselves but parents have to think twice these days before they settle on a husband for their daughter. This is a time when we appreciate our old friends." Shu-lan could imagine the precious bow her mother was making to Mrs. Wu.

One of the other women led the conversation to the Wang family of Yellow Melon Garden, the Wu girl's future home. The Wangs were well-to-do and Mrs. Wu with difficulty concealed her pride in her daughter's advantageous match. From that they went on to talk of other things, but Shu-lan knew from what she had overheard that the news of her approaching marriage was known all over the village.

She went to the kitchen and began to prepare the afternoon meal. Before it was ready the Wus' youngest son came to call his mother to supper and all the guests went home.

Mrs. Chien's good humor lasted all evening. It was not ruffled even when she heard Shu-lan and Second Brother planning to take the early-morning train back to school instead of the one in the late afternoon. She accepted without argument the explanation that Shu-lan, being a teacher, needed to be there as early as the first arrivals among the students.

"You'll have to tell them as soon as you get there to find someone else to teach in your place." For the first and only time she mentioned thus obliquely Shu-lan's approaching marriage. "I don't see how you can stay there more than a week or two. There'll be so much to do!" Her tone was brisk and pleased. She had won seventy cents in the mah-jongg game.



CHAPTER FOUR

SOMEWHERE ON THE WAY BETWEEN LUCKY Inn Village and Tunghsien that Monday morning, Shu-lan was again transformed into "Miss Chien," the fifth-grade teacher at Pilgrim Girls' School. Shortly after ten o'clock she stood in her bedroom in Court Eleven where the coolie from the station had dumped her baggage, and graciously received New Year's greetings from a woman and three girls who came running from other rooms to meet her on her arrival.

The woman was Wang Ma, or "Mother Wang," the caretaker at Court Eleven. She was from the country, and putting one fist over the other a little to the left of her stomach, she jiggled them both up and down while she asked if Shu-lan had had a pleasant vacation. The three girls, whose original greeting had been to bow deeply the minute they had first caught sight of their teacher, still felt the liveliness of holiday time. They too went through the same little ceremony as Wang Ma, but grinned all the time they were doing it because it was no longer the stylish way of expressing New Year good wishes and they considered themselves educated away from such countrified manners. After that, one of the three gave a *ching an*, the characteristic curtsy of her Manchu ancestors, and the other two mimicking her, also gave Shu-lan the old-fashioned Manchu salute. They did it with much giggling be-

cause they were Chinese and for them it was not only old style but a foreign custom as well. They liked wishing their pretty teacher "Happy New Year" in three different ways because it had a little of the flavor of play acting.

The room was supposed to have been cleaned but school servants have a slovenly way of sweeping the floor and leaving the rest of the job to the occupants. Shu-lan soon had three willing helpers. Their own rooms were probably not yet in order, but it was more fun to clean Teacher's and to wait for their roommates before tackling their own.

It was a short and easy task. Each of the dormitory rooms was twelve feet square with a brick floor and white-washed walls. The furniture in the teacher's room comprised a cupboard with some drawers in it, a stove, a study table with two chairs, and a narrow wooden bed made of boards fastened together and laid on carpenter's horses. The window which filled the upper half of the outside wall was made of paper in which were set four little panes of glass. Through these everything that happened in the yard was visible to the teacher. The paper window had its advantages too. It was much cheaper than glass and being a poorer conductor of heat wasted less in the winter and let in less in the summer.

Shu-lan was thinking that as soon as she entered this room she felt grown-up again. It was different from being just one of the children, the feeling she still had whenever she was in her parents' home in Lucky Inn Village. At the beginning of last term when she had first stood here, back in the familiar surroundings of her mother school but in a new role, she had had only the panic of the inexperienced. A half year later, the little room had now become a home from which every day she went out to do the work she loved and in which she felt adequate.

Meanwhile Wang Ma was busy getting fuel and start-

ing a fire in the small "foreign" stove, so-called because unlike the ordinary Chinese stove—a mere open-top brazier—it had a stovepipe and could not be moved at will about the room. The caretaker was an energetic little widow with a chipmunk face and a disposition so good that she could live in peace with twenty-four fifth graders and a teacher. Though illiterate—never having had a chance to go to school—she was by no means stupid, and was thoroughly self-possessed. The fifth-grade students treated her with a respect almost equal to that which they gave their teacher. They reported to her their version of everything that happened, and thus she had many opportunities to give sensible advice which to the youngsters appeared disinterested. She was also good at patching up quarrels before too much face had been lost and at knowing how much fun to make of babyish habits. Shu-lan would never know how many difficulties loyal Wang Ma had quietly solved for her during her first weeks of teaching.

Clockface and Skeeter were doing most of the talking. Sooner or later all the girls in school acquired nicknames, bestowed by observant classmates who seldom chose amiss. In class and in public Shu-lan never failed to call her pupils by their student names: Eminent Wisdom, Virtuous Glory, Gentle Peace, or As-good-as-a-son, but in her mind they went by what their fellows wisely called them, names that were real characterizations. "Clockface" fitted the short chubby twelve-year-old with a jovial, round countenance, as did "Skeeter," the tiny mite whose singing voice sounded much too big for her. Furthermore, Skeeter's surname was Wen, with the same sound as the word for mosquito, so her nickname had the added attraction of being a pun.

The third girl was an orphan from one of the decayed and impoverished Manchu communities northwest of Pe-

king, a tall, awkward, scrawny fifteen-year-old. During the preceding term she had done so well that she had already won a scholarship and more years of schooling were now assured. The school, like the rural life around it, had only the barest and simplest necessities. Yet this girl's naïve enjoyment of them made her so exultantly happy that her teacher's heart often melted in pity for her. What must have been the bitterness of her earlier childhood! The girls called her "Auntie." Clever, and more mature than her classmates, she was always helping them when mending or other housekeeping jobs proved too difficult for their inexperienced hands.

Under Auntie's supervision, Skeeter and Clockface cleaned the teacher's room with adequate diligence, chattering all the time they worked. Most of their comments were childish enough so that Shu-lan paid little attention to them. They made jokes and reported what they considered of interest about their own vacations. Auntie was standing on the desk wielding a feather duster to brush down the walls. She suddenly struck an attitude with one foot in the air and the duster held high.

"I'm Wên Ch'ang, the god of literature," she announced.

Both the smaller girls giggled. "That's right," exclaimed Skeeter. "Dressed in a blue gown and holding a scepter, like the pictures of him!"

"Then that makes us the two small servants," Clockface decided. "I'll be Deaf as Heaven."

"I'm Dumb as Earth," agreed Skeeter.

"But Miss Chien can't be Kuei Hsing, who's supposed to go around with them," Clockface said. "She's wise enough, I'm sure, but she's too pretty."

"And I'm ugly but not wise enough," Wang Ma suggested.

Shu-lan only smiled at their nonsense. The girls washed

the small glass panes, swept and dusted. While Shu-lan was straightening the contents of the drawers in the cupboard they unpacked her mattress and comforters from her bedding roll and spread them as neatly as she could have done it herself.

The work was nearing completion when Apple appeared in the doorway. She was a red-cheeked day pupil who lived not far away and being lonesome at home often came to Court Eleven to play. She was looking for someone to go with her to meet the noon train from Peking, sure to bring a big crowd of returning students. Permission being granted to all three, away they went through the bright cold sunshine.

Shu-lan took out her schoolbooks, forgotten during the weeks of vacation. She had hardly started to prepare lessons for her lively class of forty when a knock at the door announced a caller. It was another member of the faculty, Miss Pan, an ordinary-looking girl whose home was a few doors away. She supported her whole family on her salary and so, like Shu-lan, never had an extra cent to spend. The two teachers had become increasingly friendly before the holidays and she on her part had formed the habit of passing an occasional hour at Court Eleven.

Today their conversation had much the semblance of a monologue, Shu-lan having little of interest to offer except the one thing which she could not mention. Miss Pan on the contrary was full of stories. The time went by quickly. Not half had been told when voices outside proclaimed the arrival of the passengers from the noon train. The two teachers ran out to welcome them.

A dozen newcomers were squabbling with the baggagemen about their pay, but the girls stopped instantly to bow to the teachers and ask them if they had a happy New Year, while the men tried to hold their angry frowns so as to be ready a minute later to continue the argument as

ferociously as before in the hope of securing a few extra coppers. The big baggage rolls were finally deposited in the right rooms and the carriers departed in good humor, at last convinced that fierce looks would bring no additional profit. The dormitory courtyard echoed with shouts and laughter.

Court Eleven was not inside the main entrance which led to the school classrooms, but a short distance away, along the street of the village which adjoined the school grounds. The dormitory was in fact a Chinese residence and was so arranged, with the rooms built on the east, north, and west sides of a good-sized square which was enclosed on the south by a mud wall. The girls' rooms had brick beds filling half the room next to the windows. This too was like their homes. Each room accommodated four students.

As soon as they had eaten lunch the girls cleaned their rooms, unpacked and arranged their things. The baggage rolls when opened were found to contain very little besides thin mattresses, hard oblong pillows, and comforters. When each girl had put these on the brick bed, she could get the rest of her property onto one of the four shelves in the corner behind the door. They made as much noise as they liked. Evidently they were all glad to be back at school again.

The busy occupation of the students in their rooms gave Shu-lan an opportunity to call at the office. There she found crowds of students paying their fees. In spite of the hurry, the teachers in charge took time to welcome them and often to ask news of their home folks. A few parents of day pupils had come with their little girls to make sure that the precious tuition money did not get lost on the way. Such never had to wait their turn but were given precedence in the line, a courtesy allowed willingly by the younger generation when it was accepted with

polite hesitation, and resented when it appeared to be demanded as a right. The girls' bright eyes noted the attitude of each parent and put it down as debit or credit on the account of the daughter.

Shu-lan went around speaking to the teachers, but there was little chance to chat even with those she knew best. She liked them all and was happy to enjoy their comradeship again for it was as congenial a group, she felt, as one would easily find. As she was leaving the office, the distressing memory came to her that her mother had said the first thing she must do on getting back to school was to ask the authorities to find her successor as soon as possible. The painful thought went with her on her way to Court Eleven. Must she really leave all this which she loved dearly? And within a few weeks? If only she could postpone it! At least she would do nothing about it today. The next day she again put off the unpleasant duty, and again the next. Her distaste for it made procrastination easy.

It was on Wednesday morning, the second day of classes, that Miss Fu called to Shu-lan as she passed through the office on her way to her classroom. Miss Fu was a slender young woman who had herself grown up at Pilgrim. From the time of Shu-lan's student days, she had been in charge of the high-school dormitories and each succeeding student generation had found in her a sympathetic and never-failing confidante. She knew everyone who had ever been connected with Pilgrim. Her black eyes sparkled when she talked in her vivacious, eager way, and in her smile was something heartening.

But this morning her face was sober. "I suppose you've heard that Mrs. Li died yesterday," she began.

"I heard a Mrs. Li had died at the hospital. She wasn't the wife of that athletic coach over at the boys' school, was she?"

"That's just who she was! Heart trouble! It's a terrible pity."

"It's too bad," Shu-lan answered. "I didn't know her."

Miss Fu picked up a letter from her desk. "This is from Mr. Chin who will have charge of the funeral. It asks our school to send a group of girls to sing. We really can't do less than that."

"It sounds reasonable enough," Shu-lan answered, wondering why she was being consulted on a subject which seemed out of her sphere.

"The funeral is this afternoon at two thirty and it happens that all three high-school classes and even the sixth grade have work from which they ought not to be excused."

Shu-lan guessed what was coming and smiled. "So the fifth grade will please represent the girls' school?" she ventured.

"That's right. Can you? Will you?" Miss Fu's smile was nicer than most people's. It made almost everyone do whatever she wanted. Now Shu-lan stood by her desk and waited for more information.

"Choose twenty-five or thirty of your girls, the ones who'll behave best and sing best, and sometime this morning practice one of their favorite hymns so you're sure they can sing it well. Mrs. Li was so nice that I wish we could send our very best singers but with school barely running again we'll have to do the best we can. The little girls can't sing anything difficult but they sound as sweet as the big ones. With no more time to practice no group could be called really prepared." Miss Fu paused.

Miss Shang, the athletic director, was sitting near by. She too was a Pilgrim graduate, a few years older than Shu-lan. "Your girls have beautiful voices," she said. "About all they lack to be as nice as the glee club is for you and Miss Pan to sing alto with them."

"That's a good idea," Miss Fu agreed. "She can let the first-grade babies go home early this once. The funeral is to be at the hospital but I'm afraid you'll have to go to the cemetery too. I hope you don't mind." Miss Fu smiled at her again.

That afternoon Skeeter and Baby led the way as the girls started out from school marching two by two toward the hospital. The pair were inseparable friends and so much alike that they might have been twins. They were pretty, bright children from well-to-do Christian homes. Their mothers had been educated in Christian schools. Like many others so trained, they had taught their daughters from the time they could talk to sing and dance the kind of aesthetic posturing the Chinese like. They had given their girls the best Chinese manners too. Though they were so small and fun-loving, they could be depended on to do the correct thing.

Behind them came fourteen more couples with the two teachers at the end. Each girl was wearing all the clothes she owned and perhaps some borrowed ones: cap, scarf, sweater, and mittens with her padded garments. Shades of red and green predominated but almost every color in the yarn shop was represented. Their extra clothes would be needed, for it was a dull day with no sunshine to temper the cold.

They had allowed fifteen minutes, but the girls walked so fast that they arrived early. They all knew that a funeral at the hospital would be held in the enclosed yard back of the main building. Skeeter and Baby started to lead the column through the gate but suddenly stopped. The two teachers went up to the front to take charge. Shulan wondered why the faces of the two little leaders suddenly became so solemn. Then she looked through the gate.

Standing high on a frame in the center of the cold

empty yard was a heavy Chinese coffin made of polished wood. On and around it were ten or more large wreaths of bright artificial flowers with white streamers carrying the names of those who had sent them and a few words in praise of Mrs. Li. At the foot of the coffin, encircled in similar flowers, was an enlarged photograph of an attractive young woman Shu-lan had sometimes seen at church during the autumn months. Everything was in readiness for the funeral.

But what had stopped Skeeter and Baby halted Shu-lan too. Opposite the gate, his arms on the coffin and his face buried on them was a man dressed in gray, his shoulders sagging in a posture of utter dejection. It was evident that he thought himself alone. One glance at him made Shu-lan sick with sympathy. Miss Pan silently closed the gate part way and looked in the other direction.

"He loved her too much," she whispered.

After a few minutes there was a low murmur of voices and glancing in, Shu-lan could see a number of people who had entered by another gate. The Pilgrim girls at once went in also and the little company was soon complete. Those she recognized were all connected with the boys' school. The women and girls stood in a semicircle on one side of the coffin and the men on the other.

Among the faculty wives was Mrs. Hu who gave her a glance of recognition. She had been one of Shu-lan's favorite teachers. Shu-lan resolved to go soon to call on her old friend. She had been remiss not to have done it earlier.

During the whole of the fall term, they had never had a real visit, only glimpses of each other at church.

Standing near the minister was the man in gray. Shu-lan remembered that early in the autumn, seeing Mr. Li at church, she had inquired who he was. Any girl would have noticed him. His figure and poise were good recommendations for his position as athletic director. He car-

ried his head high with an appearance not of pride but of alert well-being. His face was handsome too, good-humored, with frank eyes and a mouth ready for laughter. But today it was empty of expression as if its inner light had completely gone out. He stood there haggard and wretched, oblivious to the two or three friends who kept close by him.

The service was not long. As soon as it was over in came the professional green-coated bearers, wearing their flat black hats with rakish red feathers on them. Several of the women wept silently but there was no wailing as the coffin was slowly borne out through the gate toward the cemetery.

Just outside the hospital yard the little company overtook a train of twenty or more camels padding slowly along in single file, each carrying two long gunny sacks of coal crossed and caught between his humps. The beasts minded their own business but their eyes looked so haughtily angry that the schoolgirls took pains to walk on the opposite side of the road. Rickshas, bicycles, and pedestrians paid no attention to the funeral procession, passing through it or walking with it, according to their convenience.

During the service there had been a short eulogy of young Mrs. Li and Shu-lan's mind reverted to it as she picked her way through the deep dust of the big auto road. When the bier had left the main thoroughfare and led the way along paths between the fields, she found that Miss Pan had been thinking about Mrs. Li too.

"It's altogether too sad!" she exclaimed. "You must have been in Peking in senior middle school when she came here to be one of the nurses in our hospital."

"Yes," Shu-lan answered, "I just missed her. She came the fall after I left."

"It seems to me we always have nice nurses but she was

one of the best. But of course the exciting thing was their love affair. Have you heard about that?"

"No, you see I didn't come back here even in vacations so I didn't keep track of what happened during those three years." As for "love affairs," Shu-lan knew practically nothing about them. They are not included among the experiences Chinese young ladies are supposed to have. Shu-lan had read five or six novels translated from English: such as *Little Women* and *The Secret Garden*. She had never seen the love-making of the movies. Yet she took for granted that because she had been away to school she must know more about such things than Miss Pan who had always stayed in Tunghsien. She did not realize that neither of them knew any more about falling in love than a baby playing in the sunshine on the steps of an art school knows about what goes on inside the building. Miss Pan was again speaking of Mrs. Li.

"Well, we had never heard of anyone becoming engaged in the American fashion, and we girls found out all we could about it."

"Did they just make it up themselves without their parents saying anything first?" Shu-lan inquired. She had heard a few such stories in Peking.

"I should say so! And what's more, they never did have a middleman from start to finish. He went more than once to the hospital to see her and they used to stand there in that big entrance room or sit on one of those white benches and talk for half an hour or more right before everybody. Lots of girls get a look at their future husbands before they're married, but these two just talked along like — well, like a couple of schoolteachers."

"I can't see how it would do any harm if they had something they wanted to talk about," Shu-lan said, thinking that she was one of those who had seen her future husband, yet knew very little about him.

Miss Pan went on: "And one time after church he walked with her back to the hospital and you know that was a long way out of his way and they talked as fast as they could the whole time. I saw that myself. It's funny you didn't hear about any of these things. We didn't talk about anything else all the while it was going on."

Without being critical of Miss Pan, Shu-lan thought her a little narrow in her point of view. Her ambition to go to school had no hope of fulfillment, with all those little brothers and sister to support. She could not be blamed that she was surprised at things that many people in the cities were beginning to hear about.

"People do things in Western style quite a little nowadays in Peking," Shu-lan said, "but I don't myself happen to know anybody who became engaged that way."

"Well, anyway," Miss Pan went on, "all of us young ones thought it was wonderfully exciting and all the older people said no good could come of it. But now she's gone, I guess everyone has to admit that they were about the happiest couple anywhere around."

The two teachers were at the end of the straggling procession, walking behind the schoolgirls who still managed to go two by two on the narrow paths. They hurried along through the cold.

After a minute or two Miss Pan exclaimed again: "I just can't get over how sad it is! There are so many stupid people whom nobody needs or wants and yet they live on, half-starved. Then a lovely person like Mrs. Li gets sick and dies inside of two weeks in spite of everything the hospital can do, and leaves a baby daughter and a heart-broken husband! I guess we aren't the first people in the world who couldn't figure out why, though."

After a few minutes Shu-lan asked: "How does it happen there aren't any relatives here? Isn't Mr. Li a Tung-hsien man?"

"No, his home's away off somewhere and her mother's family live beyond Tientsin," Miss Pan explained. "He came here to attend the boys' school. He must have been in college in Peking while you were in our school and then he came back here again to be assistant physical director about the time you left. I've heard them say he used to be awfully popular when he was a Pilgrim student here but I was too little to remember him."

Those at the front of the procession were moving slowly through the big red gatehouse into the cemetery grove of cedars, a refreshing patch of green in the wide gray expanse of the plain.

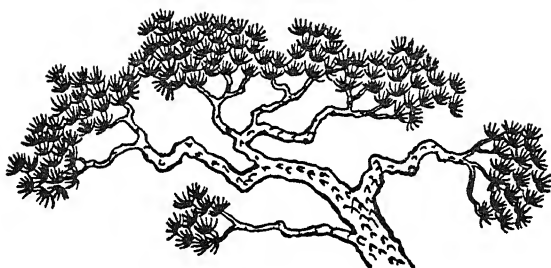
Yet a moment later under the trees, the place appeared bare and cheerless. The dull sky grew darker. As the small group gathered around the newly dug grave, occasional snowflakes began to fall.

Again the service was brief. Shu-lan found it harder to bear than the other. At the hospital, until her girls had taken their part, her mind had been on them, and she had been nervous lest they fail to do credit to their school. Now she had no distraction. Near her, several of the faculty wives were weeping silently, among them her friend Mrs. Hu. Shu-lan was standing across the open grave from Mr. Li. His grief would have touched a much harder heart than hers. His lips trembled in spite of his efforts at self-control. Finally as they sang "Lead, Kindly Light," she had to look hard at the alto notes in her book in order to sing at all. During the closing words he covered his face. The friend who stood closest to him laid a hand on his shoulder. By the end of the benediction, his expression was once again controlled, but drawn. Shu-lan could not bear to look at him.

The shivering schoolgirls were glad to walk fast on the way home and not even Miss Pan had anything to say. Shu-lan could not forget her last glimpse of Mr. Li looking

with inconsolable sadness at the grave which was being rapidly filled. Near him, waiting, had been several friends, but what could they do to comfort? The snow fell a little faster now in tiny hard flakes which blurred the farther landscape but lost themselves in the dust and left the ground as colorless as before.

“Poor Mr. Li,” Shu-lan thought, “the world must indeed look barren and gray and cold to him.”



CHAPTER FIVE

THE FIFTH GRADE HAD ONE PUPIL WHOSE name "Elegant Wisdom" was not wholly appropriate. She was an overgrown fourteen-year-old and during the fall term, while she was still a comparatively new student, the doctors had discovered that her vision was so defective that she was greatly handicapped. She had been fitted with glasses and the girls, with almost unbelievable kindness, called her "Four Eyes." Many less complimentary nicknames would have fitted her just as well. She was her teacher's most grievous affliction. When dealing with her, Shu-lan had to confess that even school occasionally had its problems.

On Friday afternoon at the beginning of geography class, Shu-lan was explaining to Four Eyes for perhaps the fifteenth time which side of a map is east and which is west. The door opened a crack and a face appeared. It was that chief man of all work, for obvious reasons commonly called "Pockmark."

"Miss Fu says to tell you there are callers," he whispered loudly across the room. Classes were not supposed to be disturbed.

"I'm sorry, girls," Shu-lan excused herself, "you'll have to study this by yourselves till I see what's wanted."

She hurried after Pockmark.

"It's your honorable father and some fatty," he in-

formed her, "and they have to get back tonight so they couldn't wait."

Shu-lan knew who "fatty" was and she dreaded the interview. She still had no plans. Suddenly she remembered with regret that she had not yet told the principal that she might soon need a successor.

The men were seated in the black carved chairs which stood on each side of the handsome old table in the reception room. When she entered and bowed to her father and then to the carter, Mr. Sung half arose and ducked his head two or three times in poorly pretended deference. Good manners, when he assumed them, fitted him badly. Shu-lan perched on the edge of a carved stool against the opposite wall.

Indicating his companion by a motion of his head, her father said: "We had other business in Tunghsien today, so we came on bicycles and thought we could take care of this too and get home before dark. The man said it wasn't allowed — I mean, to call you out of class." Mr. Chien had been impressed by Pockmark's officious manner.

"It's all right, since it's important." Shu-lan smiled at her father, remembering how he always lost self-confidence when he came inside a big school.

"Well, it's just that the date is set," Mr. Chien announced reluctantly.

This time Shu-lan did not help him. What was she going to answer?

"You know the Wus asked Old Hou to find the luckiest day before the twenty-fifth of the third moon, which is the date for their third daughter's wedding." He hesitated. He was finding it hard to tell her. He could have left it to Carter Sung, but Shu-lan guessed that he chose to tell her himself because he cared so deeply. "Now he says after studying your two horoscopes, yours and young

Wu's, that there is a very lucky day on the twentieth of the second moon, and your mother has promised it'll be all right. Only, she wants you to come home right away. The date's earlier than she expected it to be and she's all wrought up about getting the sewing done."

Shu-lan's face grew stiff as she listened. Her lips barely moved. "A lucky date for that wedding of mine?" she murmured. "There isn't such a day!" And then she heard her voice saying clearly, "I'm not going home until the end of June." She did not know when she had come to such a decision. She certainly had not thought it out. But as soon as it was made and announced, she felt stubbornly ready to die for it.

Both men were looking at her as though they must have misunderstood. The carter found his voice first. "What? You say — what?"

Shu-lan did not repeat her statement. She was wondering why she had not come to her decision earlier.

Carter Sung was not a man of patience. His fat face looked as though it would burst. "Nobody ever does a thing like that," he said angrily to Shu-lan and then realizing that his best chance lay with her father, he turned and began to scold loudly, becoming angrier and angrier the more he talked.

Shu-lan was trembling all over but she sat tall and straight in greater dignity than she had ever shown before the fifth grade. She was sorry for her father. Several times he opened his mouth to speak but before he could say anything, Mr. Sung had got another breath and was talking again.

The chief complaint seemed to be that negotiations had gone too far to be halted. A go-between could not be made to lose face by such double-dealing. The Chien parents had given their word to hand over their daughter on the appointed day and he took no responsibility for how they

managed it. If the bridal chair called for her and went back empty, let the Chiens' daughter picture for herself her parents' shame. It was nothing to him. He, Sung the carter, was glad he had no daughters.

Without moving her head, which she held as high as ever, Shu-lan glanced at her father, and pity almost weakened her resolution. He sat with downcast eyes, stricken and old. She looked away again quickly. She was not going to give in.

Carter Sung's ideas were running out. He was repeating himself. Finally Shu-lan interrupted him. She spoke quietly, and not very fast because she wanted to be courteous.

"Some of the things you have just said are true, but on the other hand you can't take the position that this date had been accepted and announced. It is still being discussed or else why did you come here today? I have only said that for a number of good reasons the date you mention is inconvenient, and that it's not worth while to set another before the end of June. What if I were seriously ill, would the Wus still send around a red chair on the twentieth day of the second moon? These things must be arranged conveniently for both sides. Mother is such a good friend of Mrs. Wu's that she wants to do whatever will please her, I know, but I have more responsibilities than an uneducated country girl, so decisions about my affairs are not quite so simple. Will you please carry my apologies to Mr. and Mrs. Wu? I'm sorry not to do as they wish."

Then Shu-lan looked at her watch and rose quickly. "I've been away from my class fifteen minutes," she said briskly. "I really can't leave them longer." She bowed to Carter Sung who was speechless with amazement at being dismissed so regally by a chit of a girl he had known all her life.

Shu-lan turned to her father. "Don't worry too much, father. They'll have to be reasonable. Waiting three months isn't going to kill anybody." She tried to laugh but the sound was empty. She knew too well the cause of his gloom. He had to go home and face her mother and the neighbors. Shu-lan might try to make her decision appear right to the middleman but there was no doubt that she had put her parents in a very embarrassing position. As Carter Sung had said, what she was trying to do just was not done.

She hurried back toward the fifth-grade classroom, her mind awl with thoughts she had no time to disentangle. Even now she did not know whether she had decided right. If she was going to marry young Wu in June, why not just as easily in March? Of what use was this postponement, the solution which a few minutes ago had seemed so clever? When the whole village learned that she had disobeyed her parents and they had lost face almost unbearably, what would she have gained that was of any value?

Busy with this conflict, she was at the door of her classroom before she heard anything amiss. The sounds inside put her recent conversation immediately out of her mind. She stood motionless a minute, startled. She could hear the unmistakable squawk of a Punch-and-Judy show punctuated by delighted giggles.

She opened the door and stepped in. Every student in the room, big or little, good or bad, was sitting on the edge of her seat in absorbed attention as Monkey and Manager, two lively twelve-year-olds, without stage properties or any other aid, were giving a remarkable reproduction of the performance many of the children had just seen inside the penny peep shows at New Year's fairs. There was instant silence as the two performers slipped into their front seats and hid their faces in their arms on their desks.

Shu-lan walked to the front of the room. Her pupils were

certainly entertaining but this was unquestionably out of order. How should she punish them? She stood wondering what to say, but her silence was more than the students could bear. They squirmed and made themselves as small as possible. Eight or ten of them, whose consciences were the most tender, hid their faces on the desks. Shu-lan noticed that Auntie was one of these but she nevertheless said quietly, "Will the monitor please report?"

Auntie stood, humped over her desk so that her bobbed hair nearly covered her face. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, but said nothing. Shu-lan guessed that she was trying to avoid tattling.

"So the monitor told them not to do it and they wouldn't pay attention to her?" Shu-lan deduced. Several heads nodded. She could see one of Monkey's big round eyes watching from the shelter she had made herself.

"But everyone in the class was laughing and enjoying the fun," Shu-lan went on. "It looks as though everyone ought to be punished." Again heads nodded. What should she do with them? As compared to all the sins possible in this wicked world, what they had done was not too serious. In fact, the stunt was clever, one she had never seen done before. Then, like many another schoolteacher, she sought light from her students.

"Should the two who did it get any more punishment than those who laughed at it?"

All the shaken heads answered, "No."

"What do you think would be fair — not too much nor too little, but exactly enough so you can be depended on to study quietly the next time I am out of the room?"

Manager, even in disgrace, was bursting with ideas. She popped up. "We must say we're sorry, and make up the time after school, and study the geography twice as hard," she proposed, and it was so decided.

When, after school, to the accompaniment of the shouts

of other classes at play, the fifth grade had studied geography for fifteen minutes "twice as hard," Shu-lan said: "It wasn't the right time or place for it, but I think the Punch-and-Judy show is a good idea. Let's ask the two girls to practice it a little and the next time it's our turn to perform a stunt on an assembly program, we'll do that for the school."

There was no doubt of the enthusiasm with which this suggestion was received. The fifth graders giggled as they put their books into their bags and started home. Their memory of Monkey and Manager was still vivid.

The mood in which the teacher left was very different from that of her pupils. Loaded down as she was with papers and notebooks to grade, school affairs were not her heaviest burden. Her depression was through sympathy with her father, pedaling over the miles to Lucky Inn Village with a disgruntled companion. And when they arrived there! What would her mother say? Certainly she would be very angry. She would complain that her daughter was lazy and selfish and proud and unfilial. Would she not be right? Why should Chien Shu-lan imagine that she could break customs centuries old? If she were in Lucky Inn tonight she would have a hard time justifying herself, even in her own mind, in the face of her mother's criticisms. Marriages are always arranged by parents.

But then — The thought of complying with what her parents had planned for her was increasingly unbearable. She hated the drab drudgery of a daughter-in-law's existence, even more than she had a week before. And as for young Wu! Suddenly into her mind came the picture of Mr. Li as she had seen him often on Sunday mornings. Why couldn't Wu have been like that? Since her fiancé was suspected of dealing in "white powder," was she not justified in waiting until she could be sure he was not guilty? Even

her own parents could not escape some self-reproach if they placed their only daughter in such an evil situation. She had only asked that the wedding be deferred a few months. Why could not her own mother allow her that small freedom?

Back and forth she argued. She tried to forget it and put her mind on arithmetic papers. It was no use. The topic which was exploding in the Chien home in Lucky Inn that evening kept Shu-lan also in a turmoil. Far into the night, after she had turned out her light, she heard the village watchman's "tap — tap" on a hollow wooden rattle at one end of the street answered by "tap — tap" at the other end on a rattle of a different size, sounding a different note. Usually the rhythm put her quickly to sleep, but tonight, troubled by her problem, she tossed restlessly.

When school had opened after the New Year vacation there had been a new pupil in the fifth grade. She was fourteen, anemic, thin, and very ill at ease. Her face was so pale and bony that her large eyes were the most prominent feature. The girls dubbed her "Bug Eyes."

"That's a horrid name," Shu-lan had scolded, the first time she had heard it. "Her eyes aren't a bit like a bug's eyes and if they were, there would still be no excuse for such a nickname."

She had found that the girl wrote Chinese beautifully and had studied a great deal in the classics. Her knowledge of Chinese literature and history was far beyond fifth-grade level.

"Then why are you in this class?" Shu-lan asked.

"I don't know enough arithmetic and geography," the girl answered shyly. She could add, subtract, multiply, and divide a little. She could make simple calculations on an abacus such as is used in Chinese shops. But fractions were

a maze in which she was instantly lost. Shu-lan, giving her extra instructions, found her bright and exceedingly diligent.

"I've always had an old classical teacher at home," she said. "I've never been inside a school before." She almost whispered this secret to the teacher, she was so ashamed of being so different from the other girls. "I'm the 'camel running in a flock of sheep,'" she said, using a common Chinese expression describing a big child playing with little ones.

"That's one thing you don't have to worry about," Shu-lan answered. "There are several in the class older than you." Hearing the confession, Shu-lan understood a great deal — the unevenness of her pupil's scholastic attainments, and even more, her diffidence with her classmates.

In the office, Shu-lan learned that the new girl was from one of the oldest Tunghsien families, formerly wealthy and still by no means poor. She had been sent to Pilgrim with the stipulation that she must never, under any circumstances, be required to go inside a Christian church. Evidently her parents did not suspect that the whole life of Pilgrim students had enough Christian flavor so that their daughter could not miss catching some of it without ever entering the church building. Apparently the family was trying to secure what they considered the advantages of Pilgrim without being contaminated by what they thought undesirable. The father's private ricksha brought the daughter promptly every morning; at noon she ate in the school dining room; at the end of the school day the ricksha called for her again.

On the second day of school Shu-lan again heard someone mentioning Bug Eyes. At the beginning of the afternoon session she gave the whole class a stern scolding about unkindness in little things and absolutely forbade that name. Since it had not become habitual from long usage,

it would be easy to change. She waited while they chose another. Good-naturedly compliant, when she remained firm, they immediately decided on "Ricksha Rider." It was twice as long as the girl's real name, but satisfied their preference for nicknames.

Day by day Shu-lan noticed the girl. She was always by herself and seemed never to play except when it was required, then stumbled about as if she could not understand what was expected of her. In her lessons she was soon able to keep up with the rest and needed no more special tutoring. Shu-lan wished she could help Ricksha Rider find friends and a happy relationship with her classmates as easily as she had taught her fractions.

On the morning after Mr. Chien and Carter Sung had called on her, Shu-lan, wearied by her night of restlessness, arrived in front of the big gate of the school with little of her usual vivacity. Pockmark was sweeping the ground with a long coarse broom of twigs. The already familiar private ricksha was departing toward the city.

"He's getting over being stuck-up," Pockmark commented cheerfully, indicating the ricksha man by a motion of his head.

"Why, wouldn't he talk?" Shu-lan inquired, interested. She usually found Pockmark's conversations amusing and his observations shrewd.

"Not till yesterday afternoon while he was waiting. I gave him a cigarette and that helped a little."

She knew she need ask nothing more. Pockmark would be uncomfortable until he had told what he had learned.

"It was strange how Ricksha Rider suddenly came here to school, but it's plain enough when you know why. She's engaged to be married and her future mother-in-law gave orders she had to go to school. A tutor at home won't do. So her parents have to make the best of it."

Pockmark was certainly right that many things were

made clear by this illuminating bit of news. "Why did her parents send her here, I wonder?" her teacher mused.

"You don't need to wonder," Pockmark answered. "They don't want her to lose the manners they've drilled into her. All the old women say that as modern girls go, Pilgrim students are about as good as you'll find."

"Who are the mother-in-law's family?"

Pockmark grinned mischievously. "Wait till I've given him another cigarette. I'll find out all about them."

Shu-lan rather suspected he would. Poor little Ricksha Rider! So she was an engaged girl too.

Boys in senior or even junior middle school, whether willing or not, were often married, because their wives became useful members of their husbands' families. But parents begrudge money to educate a daughter destined soon to be married. Such girls in Pilgrim were few. No wonder Pockmark's curiosity was aroused.

Obsessed though Shu-lan had been with the arguments which she imagined were agitating the Chien home in Lucky Inn Village, it had not occurred to her that she would hear from her family again immediately, so she was surprised that Big Brother appeared the very next day after the call from her father and Carter Sung. His having made the long cold trip proved without saying that the upheaval had been even more momentous than she had pictured. Neither of them wasted any time on introductory remarks.

"Mother was very angry?" Shu-lan asked, watching his face anxiously because he looked so disturbed.

"To put it straight, she won't let you get by with it," he answered grimly.

Shu-lan felt a chill of apprehension. "What did she say?" she asked.

"She was so angry it nearly killed her, and so there

wasn't much she didn't say," Big Brother answered. There was not a hint of a smile on his face. Apparently the memory was bitter. "You know mother is not like father, and she blamed him for what she called his stupidity. She said she'd told him years ago that leaving your feet unbound and sending you to school would end up no one could tell where. She said that if she could have been managing it she would have put you in your place at once and no mincing matters. I'm sure it was only the cold weather that kept her from coming today herself. She sent me to 'talk some sense' into you. At least I think I can make her position clear."

"And now you too will get a scolding when you go back."

"You mean you don't intend to do what they want?" her brother asked with a troubled frown. "I was afraid of that. But you want to remember it's hard on us at home. Everybody is gossiping about our family."

"It's an awful problem. For a long time I didn't know what to do," Shu-lan confessed. "I want so much to do what father and mother tell me! Yet at the same time, I simply can't do it."

"Mother said you'd better look out. Mrs. Wu isn't going to do all the housework just so you can teach school an extra month or two. Mother said: 'Really! If the Wus refuse to wait, and get another girl and leave that spoiled child of ours high and dry, how'll she feel?' "

For the first time light came into Shu-lan's eyes. "Brother! Does she think maybe that would happen?"

Her brother looked at her soberly. "People sometimes threaten it but I can't believe a thing like that could happen between us and the Wus. You'd never get over the disgrace."

In all her hours of deliberation and anxiety, such a way out had never occurred to Shu-lan as a possible solution of

her problem. Several times she had thought that her death or that of her betrothed would dissolve the relationship, but she had no idea of committing suicide and from what she could see, young Wu looked so healthy that she had dismissed the possibility of his early death. Among people she had known there was no other way to break an engagement. But if the Wus chose to substitute another girl she could avoid the hated marriage altogether! Forever! Could she drive them to do it?

"You think the disgrace would be more than I could bear?" she echoed her brother's statement, doubtfully. "I only wish they would get someone else."

"Perhaps your being a student might make it a little easier," he said, considering the question. "Since I was in the winter school, I can see how differently people can look at things. Certainly many a village girl, being dropped for someone else, would commit suicide." His expression softened and he said, to her surprise, "I'd rather you were married to Wu than to lose my sister." She could not remember when anyone in her family had ever before expressed so much affection. They were both embarrassed, but Shu-lan was touched and pleased too.

"I won't commit suicide," she assured him.

"You don't know how unbearable people might make it for you if you refuse to marry Wu," her brother said. "It's hard to guess how far folks will go when they start acting mean."

"I think I'd just stay away from home. People outside our village wouldn't care so much. It isn't as though I couldn't make my way in the world. I'll eat as well as if the Wus were feeding me."

Big Brother nodded his head. "You're right. Life in their house won't be particularly pleasant."

Shu-lan continued: "Besides, we haven't mentioned the most important thing of all. Suppose the Wus' son is begin-

ning to take heroin. I can't stand the thought of marrying him unless I'm sure he's not. If he is, he'll ruin the family without a question. And if it's a disgrace to refuse to marry him after we've been betrothed wouldn't it be almost as bad if I had to come back to my mother's home because my husband's family became so poor they couldn't support me? That's what is likely to happen if he becomes an addict, without mentioning any of the wretchedness which would precede such a smashup! "

"There's something in what you say," Big Brother replied quietly. "And even though avoiding this marriage means doing something everyone will say just can't be done, I think it's possible, and if you want to try I won't blame you."

"Oh, brother, really? And do you honestly think I can get out of it altogether? "

"If you're sure you want to and don't care what people say about you, you can try." For a minute he sat thinking. "But what am I to say when I go back? "

Shu-lan considered. "Well — you can tell our parents that my mind is unchanged and you're afraid I'm going to be very stubborn. Since I'm not there to be scolded, you can put all the blame on me — where it belongs. You needn't admit to them what a good older brother you are being."

"Then I might meet Carter Sung accidentally and put into his head the idea that there are plenty of girls who aren't teaching school and that most of them are better housekeepers than my sister."

"That's only the truth," Shu-lan interrupted him to say.

"And that I can't see why the Wus don't hunt up a girl who is easy to manage from the start." He paused a minute. "But don't count on it. The Wus may not be willing to change."

Their further conversation was only news of the family: There had been no letter from Fifth Brother in the rug factory in Peking; Ninth Brother was in school as usual; Sister-in-law was well; Sugarball was jabbering all day long; Lotus Bud had six teeth. Then Big Brother left for the Rural Service Center to visit his friends overnight since it was a time of leisure on the farm, and there was no need to hurry home. Tomorrow would be soon enough to face his mother anyway.

Now if the Wus would only drop her! The idea grew on her with every hour. She hoped it so ardently that she began to feel sure they would. Already it was as if that heavy burden had rolled off her mind. Surely she was going to be free! She wished she could run and shout!

Almost before she knew what she wanted, her wish was granted. Skeeter and Baby had known that their teacher had a caller and had waited politely, just in sight of the door. When they saw her brother leave, they came rushing up, breathless.

"Please, Miss Chien, we hear there's a basketball game over at the boys' school against the Catholic University, and we've got all our work done and please —"

"Yes, you may go, and everyone else who wants to, and I'll go along myself."

The two were immediately transformed into jumping jacks, or perhaps they were jack rabbits, from the speed with which they covered the ground, hopping about while they yelled to all fifth graders the news that an excursion was in prospect. Shu-lan ran to tell Wang Ma that she was to be temporarily in charge of Court Eleven and then started out with ten or a dozen girls, followed by as many more stragglers pulling on their sweaters as they came. The merry company was halfway there when they met someone who told them that the game had already been going ten minutes or so. The smaller ones ran pell-mell and even the

big girls and their teacher walked so that their cheeks were pink when they arrived at the outdoor courts.

A hundred or more girls stood in a group at one end. All the rest of the spectators' space on three sides of the courts was filled by boys cheering for their local school. Since most of them were themselves members of minor teams they watched the game with the keenness which is possible only for those who know it well.

Both sides were playing fast basketball with excellent teamwork. The visiting college boys were said to be ahead, but not very much, and the local high-school boys were making them work hard. Again and again the ball nearly went into the basket at one end or the other. Each time that happened the younger girls squealed in excitement. They shouted just as loudly when it went in. They cared very little who won, and kept no account of the score. It was too much bother. But they knew enough about basketball to enjoy it and were thrilled to be where something lively was going on.

Shu-lan, too, was relaxing. She was not like the little girls, entirely unconscious of the numerous attractive members of the other sex. Without being willing to confess it, she enjoyed seeing and being seen. She knew at least by name most of the men teachers who were present. She noticed that Mr. Li was one of the officials in the game. His Western-style sweater and slacks showed off his athletic figure to good advantage.

While the teams were actually playing nobody's attention wandered. In the rest intervals Shu-lan listened to the remarks her girls made. She enjoyed them all, but Monkey in particular could be relied upon to be entertaining. It was partly because of her ready wit and partly from a gay sportive tone which contrasted with the innocent expression on her face. Shu-lan heard her now, speaking for her teacher's benefit.

"My big brother says none of the other teachers at Pilgrim are as pretty as ours. He says all the boys over here say so." She glanced at Shu-lan to be sure her remark was being heard.

"The scamp!" Shu-lan said to herself, trying to appear unconcerned as she turned half away.

Fortunately just then Miss Pan joined them from somewhere in the crowd. When the game was over she walked home with them. It was cold and they were hungry but it had been a lot of fun to forget everything in watching the swift, graceful skill of the players.

During the evening Shu-lan's mind was as much upon the talk she had had with Big Brother as upon her work. If only the plan they had discussed could be made to work!



CHAPTER SIX

THREE OR FOUR DAYS LATER, MISS FU AGAIN called Shu-lan. "You know that the association of churches meets at Tunghsien in about two weeks, and the church here always gives a big welcome to the delegates with music and stunts and a play or two at the boys' assembly hall. This time the committee asks our school for songs and a funny play. You may remember we never let the big girls take part in these mixed programs. They might have too good a time backstage with the boys. It's too much work to chaperon them. If we did a poor job of it the delegates would be sure to carry gossip back to the grandmothers." Miss Fu's eyes twinkled. "So here's another task for the fifth grade."

Shu-lan scowled. "Oh, but this is an awfully hard job!" she objected.

"*'Neng che to lao!'* The able ones carry more load," Miss Fu answered in a proverb.

"Has anybody a copy of a play that we can give?"

"No. I think you'll have to make up your own. We always do. But with all those clever girls—" Miss Fu's tone implied that the fifth-grade classroom was full of little geniuses.

"Well, help me think," Shu-lan compromised. All her school life she had been in groups who made up and presented original plays, so she could not pretend that the technique was unfamiliar. It would be a great deal of work, but her students would be thrilled with the chance.

"I have thought about it a little," Miss Fu answered. "How about one of those old-fashioned marriages that schoolboys are often dragged into where the boy is fourteen or fifteen or even less and the bride over twenty because his mother wants a girl old enough to be an efficient housemaid? I think we ought to give the audience something instructive about social wrong of some kind. Most of these delegates come from the country where there are church members conservative enough to demand that their children make just such impossible marriages."

Shu-lan thought she perhaps knew as much about that as Miss Fu did. "Yes," she agreed, "I think the old marriage customs could easily furnish us a topic. I suppose that in the past you've given plays about illiteracy and about teaching public health."

"Too many times!" Miss Fu answered. "And funeral customs, though many of them need reform, aren't easy to make into something funny. We always think the plays are more effective if they are humorous. People talk about them more and remember them better. Well, let me know if you need any help."

In China, everyone has a love for drama and natural ability in its presentation. The fifth grade was no exception. They easily came to the conclusion that they had been asked because of their superior talent. They undertook the assignment with a zeal that made perfect lessons the rule, because dawdling would subtract from the time they could spend on their play. It became their central interest.

So many of the girls had a country background that once having decided upon the characters and having framed the plot, they supplied the appropriate dialogue extemporaneously. All this proposed conversation was of course subject to vigorous discussion by all present. In the course of three or four days they had even the details pretty well agreed upon.

Shu-lan wanted them to write their play out, a process they considered such a silly waste of time and energy that she finally had to threaten punishment.

"It's too much work to write so many words," they complained, "and what would it be good for?" They greeted with scorn her idea that it might be handy in case anyone forgot her part. "How could a person forget? And if anyone did forget, she'd be awfully stupid if she couldn't say something just as good."

Shu-lan remembered that this had been her own point of view as a student, and that never had she been required to write down her part in any play. But the thought of having her girls appear in the big auditorium at the boys' school made her nervous, and she wanted something in her hands from which to prompt them if they forgot. When she insisted, there was nothing to do but write it all out. Ink stones and brushes were produced and each girl contributed one sheet of "little-word paper" — so-called because it was ruled in squares for writing small characters. The actresses demanded a division of labor and insisted that those who had no parts should do most of the writing. These in turn considered that they had already been abused by being left out and counted this an added indignity. Eventually, however, the despised work was done.

It was a three-act play with Sonny, depicted as a student in Pilgrim Boys' School, called home to his own wedding which had been arranged without his knowledge because his mother wanted a daughter-in-law to do the work. For the twenty-year-old fiancée the girls had chosen Four Eyes. Since she was the bride it was not necessary for her to say anything. There was no part suitable for Honeysweet, the girl who usually played the pretty heroine, so they made her the spoiled younger sister of the bridegroom. Old Man was the father and Auntie one of several women who belonged to the family. The fifth graders chuckled when

they chose Amah for the boy's mother. She had made her reputation by being able to imitate a bound-footed country woman stumping around on her heels while she talked in shrill uncouth tones. The story of their play represented a near tragedy in the life of many a schoolboy but Amah would make it appear funny. The children were not concerned with Miss Fu's interest in social reform. They only wanted to put on a good show.

The dialogue, when it had finally taken form, was piquant with rural colloquialisms, certain to provoke laughter. The girls were impatient when Shu-lan, watching her manuscript, tried to make the actresses say their parts word for word as they had written them. She knew their ability to lose themselves in their roles was invaluable, but she also wanted them to practice speaking slowly and clearly enough so that the audience could understand everything they said.

Every afternoon they rehearsed until the day students could barely get home before dark. The weather turned unseasonably cold and dreary. Finally four days before their public appearance the girls drove their teacher nearly to distraction. What was the use of practicing every day if they only jabbered and mumbled through the story as if it was for their own amusement? She had explained a dozen times why she wanted them to act so that all the audience could see and hear, and again that afternoon she gave them a little talk on the subject. They might as well have been wax dolls. They plainly thought they were good enough.

Shu-lan wondered what to do. She could give up and let them perform in their helter-skelter fashion and everyone of them would become good-natured again; or she could insist on further practice and they would surround her with an atmosphere of icy obedience which might not thaw in the four days left before the play. What if this

play, undertaken by all with delight, should end the harmony between teacher and students which had made the fifth-grade classroom such a joy? Would the slight improvement in quality or performance be worth the risk? Shu-lan couldn't answer these questions.

She decided to dismiss both the girls and the problem until tomorrow.

The days had been passing rapidly. It was already ten days since her mother's command that she come at once. Did the silence mean she might hope that she need not go at all? The thought of her impending marriage, busy though she was, enshrouded her thoughts like a fog.

As it turned out, news from home came before she had expected it. On Tuesday, three days before the big meeting, Carter Sung arrived during the noon recess. Without her father's presence she was ill at ease with the match-maker. It was partly because she was a little afraid, knowing that in the ways of the world she was no match for the wily carter, and partly that being always conscious of her dislike for him she distrusted her ability to make wise unbiased decisions in the vital matters which must be discussed. For these reasons, when she met him in the reception room she was unnecessarily stiff in the customary formalities of greeting, waiting for him to lead up to the information she was so eager to hear.

Mr. Sung was not a gentleman but he knew something about how gentlemen behave and Shu-lan was amused to see how obviously he was acting a part. It did not occur to her that, like Mr. Chien, he was self-conscious and ill at ease in a school. After he had excused himself at some length for coming without her father or brother and for taking her time, he came at last to the point; Mr. and Mrs. Wu flatly refused to put off her marriage beyond the twentieth of the second moon.

For an instant the statement took Shu-lan's breath, and

then something in the back of her mind reminded her that the world is full of bargaining. This uncompromising message from the Wus might not be the final answer to the hint she was sure Big Brother had taken opportunity to drop. She gave Carter Sung a searching look and his eyes fell.

Shu-lan spoke quietly and in a tone of regret.

"It is very unfortunate that they want such an early date, because as I explained to you before, I am not in a position to comply with their wishes. My contract with this school does not end until the first of July. I could ask to be excused a week or two earlier, provided my classes were finished, but the twentieth of the second moon comes about the twenty-fourth of March by the Western calendar. Today is already the seventh. It isn't three weeks off. It's quite impossible."

Carter Sung made no answer. Shu-lan waited in patience. If he had any other proposal to make, let him make it. At last he cleared his throat, pushed up first one sleeve and then the other, planting his feet rather far apart, squarely on the floor. He let his voice drop as though what he was saying was a great secret.

"Mrs. Wu says she will have a daughter-in-law on the twentieth of the second moon and not a day later. She says she will have no other than the daughter of the Chiens—but in fact there are many other girls of marriageable age," he paused a moment before he continued, "and Mr. Wu has debts."

Again there was a long pause. Shu-lan made up her mind that Carter Sung should do the talking. So long as she kept still she could be sure she was not saying the wrong thing. She wished she were not so inexperienced and then smiled faintly to herself when it occurred to her that in what she was planning to do few of all the millions of women in China had any more experience than she. No one she had heard of had ever done such a thing.

Finally Mr. Sung spoke again, "Just how badly do you want to avoid this marriage?" he asked bluntly.

Shu-lan spoke with equal frankness. "Do you mean how much am I willing to pay?"

"I'm not sent by the Wus with any such question. I can't promise they'd consider it. Mr. Wu owes enough money so that the interest on it comes pretty hard. If I could tell him that being satisfied with some other girl for daughter-in-law would be worth five hundred dollars to him —"

"Five hundred dollars!" Shu-lan echoed blankly, her hopes evaporating. "Last term I paid my board and spent nothing else and managed to save only seventy-five dollars from a half-year's salary."

Carter Sung did not look surprised. He had already informed himself about Shu-lan's financial condition. "Oh, well," he said, "I'm not sure I could persuade them anyway." He rose.

Shu-lan had never before wanted anything so desperately. But five hundred dollars! Where would she get it? Or even half of that amount? She could be sure that the middleman counted on a generous commission for himself. What was the minimum that would buy his aid and purchase freedom from the Wus? What should she say?

Carter Sung was leaving. Was she allowing her one chance to slip by? If she could only think faster! Her body was tense.

"And if I could, the old man would probably want more than you could pay," he added carelessly.

She tried to smile at him, assuming a naturalness she was far from feeling. "If he wants more than I can pay, why, I can't pay it and instead of getting some help on his debts, he won't be getting anything." Was she saying the wise thing? Did she dare to mean what she had said? She was tacitly agreeing to pay a large sum, and if it was not enough, to refuse to be married at all — could she seri-

ously consider that? "Maybe you'll be coming again in a few days," she added as casually as she could. He must come back, whatever happened! Perhaps if she had time — something told her she was only fooling herself — two or three days would do her no good. Yet when he was gone she was glad that the one door of escape which had so far appeared was not yet closed. The ability she had shown in bargaining had surprised even herself. How could she be sure her plans would not miscarry? She was fearful and worried.

She hurriedly brought her attention back to school affairs and found to her surprise that the problem of the day before had solved itself in her mind. When she went into the classroom she had lost the strain of indecision and was at ease again. The girls, reflecting her mood, relaxed and became cheerful too.

"I know what we'll do," she told them. "We'll ask Miss Fu and maybe some of the high-school girls to come to our practice today. You can do one act your way and one mine, and we'll ask them to decide which will give our school more face. I'll take their judgment on it."

"We don't need to," Monkey whispered from the front seat, "your way's better." All over the room girls grinned. They too had a night to think about it as well as a lively interchange of ideas on the playground that morning. Their surrender was both complete and ungrudging.

Five hundred dollars! Or perhaps four hundred dollars? Or even three hundred dollars? The savings of two years! To be sure, freedom was worth it. That was not the question. The trouble was it must be handed over within two weeks, and where would it come from?

Shu-lan in her sheltered life had only heard of money-lenders. She had never dealt with one. But she knew where one lived. He was a member of the church who always sat toward the front and was treated with respect by

the people in the congregation. Shu-lan wished she could get information about him from Miss Pan but was afraid of arousing her curiosity. She would just go and see the man. Certainly other people who wanted to borrow money must do it that way.

The next day after school, without planning very carefully what she would say, Shu-lan called on Mr. Ning. The interview was not long. They talked in a small bare office where it was plain there was never room for anything beside cold business. Mr. Ning was a large old man with a dirty gray cotton outer garment over his padded clothes. His hands were thin and muscular, with long, well-kept nails. He had a strong jaw and a mouth that could be hard, but Shu-lan noticed only his eyes, shrewd and calculating.

"I am Miss Chien from Pilgrim Girls' School and I want to inquire about borrowing money," she told him without preliminaries.

"How much?" he asked.

"Perhaps three hundred dollars," she said.

"Three tens or three hundreds?" He was not accustomed to having a young woman borrow such a large sum.

"Three hundred. What would the interest be?"

"It depends a little on the security. If you offer the mortgage on good farm land the rate is two and a half per cent a month, but if the security is not quite so good, you'd have to pay the ordinary rate which is three per cent a month." All this was only routine to the money-lender, but Shu-lan had to stop and figure it out.

"That's nine dollars a month for interest," she said aloud, adding to herself, "out of the fifteen a month which is the most I can possibly save." When would she get any of the principal paid? "Is that — is that the rate other shops would ask?" she finally stammered.

"As I said, it depends on the security. What would you want to offer?"

Mr. Ning smiled sourly when he learned she had nothing but her salary at the girls' school. She waited while he thought a moment. "If I have a statement signed by the treasurer of the school that he'll see that it's paid — or —" He gave her a sharp look. "What about your father? Is he living?"

"Yes, but he would not expect to be responsible for this."

"Oh!" Mr. Ning answered noncommittally. "Three hundred dollars is a large sum. I should want a little time."

Shu-lan flushed. She felt confident he could have produced three thousand dollars on very short notice. He meant he wasn't sure she was a safe enough investment. "Oh, I wasn't planning to borrow it today. I merely wanted to inquire," she answered and managed to get out without letting him see the tears in her eyes. It *was* today that she wanted it!

What had she been expecting? Why was she disappointed? People had had experiences like this before, or there never would have been a proverb — "It is easier to catch a tiger in the mountains than to ask for a loan of money."

"The trouble with me is I'd like fairy stories to come true," she scolded herself. "I'm like a child and want everything to be easy! Don't I want to be free? Even if it takes ten years to pay for it?"

But she could not immediately talk away her depression. What ought she to do? She was wandering aimlessly toward the big courtyard where she had lived as a student. Suddenly she thought of Miss Fu. Feeling very inadequate, like the little junior-high-school girl she had once been here, she knocked on the familiar door.

Miss Fu was a good listener and Shu-lan, oppressed by the secret she had never told before, poured it all out. When she had finished, including even the discouraging

visit to the moneylender, Miss Fu exclaimed, "To think you've been carrying around a story like that and none of us guessed!"

Shu-lan murmured ruefully in return, "Only it's not a story to me," and began to cry softly.

"It will be one of these days," Miss Fu promised her. "Don't feel so badly."

"But what if I really can't find anyone who'll loan me money without a mortgage on land? You know I haven't any! Or what if I should manage to borrow money that will take almost forever to repay and then the Wus should refuse it?" Both of these possibilities could so easily happen that Shu-lan cried harder as she spoke of them. "I'm sure my mother will never speak to me again when she finds out what I'm doing. Maybe she knows already. She'll never let me come home any more! Maybe I ought to marry Wu and be done with it."

"Now wait a minute!" Miss Fu interrupted. "Don't cry! I'm afraid you're tired out with that play you've been practicing. I'd never have asked you to do it if I'd known you had all this on your mind."

Shu-lan wiped her eyes. "I think perhaps it's been just as well that I've been so busy. You've no idea!" She began to cry again. "I still don't know whether I'm right in trying to avoid marriage. Sometimes I think I should endure it. And other times I think it would be wickedly throwing my life away to go to such a home and such a husband when I can do other things which seem more worth-while to me. Yet if breaking my engagement is right for me, why haven't lots of other girls done it? You know you've never heard of one. Surely there have been many of them who have had as good reasons as mine, and yet they did what their parents had agreed to and never once thought of doing anything else. Is the difference only that I'm more selfish and unfilial than they?"

"No," Miss Fu answered seriously, "you're just more educated. You're doing your crying now because people aren't going to understand you, whereas they do theirs after they're married and find out what they're in for. You may think you're having an unpleasant time for these next few months, and of course it won't be over until you finish paying the bill, but I'm certain the unpleasantness and unhappiness won't be anything compared to what you'd get into if you did what your parents planned."

"You sound so sure!" Shu-lan murmured.

"I *am* sure," Miss Fu answered. "I never say anything about it but my brother's wife has trouble like this in her mother's home. Her older brother has made the whole family endless distress because he acquired the heroin habit. It isn't like a trip to the dentist or an operation where one bears the pain a while and then it's better. As long as the victim lives, it continues to grow worse and worse until it's unendurable. And the women of the family suffer most. So as soon as you mentioned heroin, I had no doubts at all about what you ought to do."

"If it hadn't been for this heroin business, I might have gone ahead for fear of displeasing my parents and of shocking people, but I've never wanted to marry young Wu."

"As for horrifying everyone by breaking an engagement, they may be thankful if that's the worst they ever hear! You can say it's easy for me to think lightly of the disgrace you'll suffer because it won't fall on me, but it's because I'm out of it that I can look at it in an unprejudiced way." She stopped and looked at Shu-lan sympathetically. "I say I'm impartial but of course I'm not. I can't pretend I care much what happens to the Wus, whereas I hope that you yourself will live long and be happy," she ended with a smile.

"It's not just the Wus. Disgracing your family isn't a small affair in a country village. My mother is going to be

furious and never let me forget it. What I mind even more, she's going to make father miserable." Shu-lan was crying again, remembering how her father had looked. It was easier to dismiss her mother's anger than her father's patient suffering.

"That won't last very long, I hope," Miss Fu tried to cheer her. "Now we must make plans. The first thing is to get some money and have it ready to show to this man Sung when he comes."

"But I told you, Mr. Ning didn't want to loan me money."

Miss Fu laughed. "He's not the only man who has a few hundred dollars. The real question is how much is the least you can pay." She explained that she had her savings invested in one of the near-by coalyards and could borrow on that security whenever necessary. She had done it before at a rate of interest less than any moneylender would give, and the next day she would do it again and loan the money to Shu-lan with her salary as security.

"We'd better make a businesslike arrangement. We'll get the school treasurer to help us write it out. He needn't be told what it's for. I'll get two hundred dollars tomorrow. I'm afraid we can't count on its being enough but the sight of cash is always persuasive."

Presently Shu-lan returned to her room at Court Eleven, greatly comforted. Perhaps nothing would work out as they had planned but Miss Fu's confidence gave her courage and hope and the burden was lighter now that it was shared. She spent a long evening working on fifth-grade notebooks and writing lessons and the minute she went to bed, without once hearing the night watchmen's rattles, she fell sound asleep.



CHAPTER SEVEN

ACCORDING TO THE CHINESE LUNAR CALENDAR, spring had officially begun early in the new year though the air was still sharp and cold. On the second day of the second moon, while the sun had only begun to warm the earth, the festival of the Awakening of the Insects had been celebrated, when the dragon raises his head after a winter of retirement, and little flying things are expected to come out and sport in the sunshine. On the tree-lined moat, which ran between the Pilgrim school buildings and the old weather-beaten wall of the city, the ice melted, but it still lacked two or three weeks of the time to "open the ground." Christian farmers did not offer the old spring sacrifices but they worked their fields by the same almanac as their non-Christian neighbors. Spring had not advanced enough for men to work in their fields. This period of comparative idleness was a free time in which to go to the city for the church-association meeting. The date had been set for March the tenth.

For many of the delegates it was the big outing of the year, despite the lack of luxuries. They carried their own comforters and were prepared to roll up in them on any wooden or brick bed. They wore padded clothes, for there would be no heat in the rooms. Money spent on coal was considered extravagance when people could get along on the warmth of winter clothing, with daily increasing help from the sun. Country people were used to ordinary dis-

comforts and expected nothing else. There were greater compensations. Among these, the brightest spot was the "welcome" on Friday night in the big hall at the boys' school when the students from both high schools presented their most entertaining tricks.

School routine went on that day as usual, but excitement was in the air for the students too. By Friday noon each performer in the fifth-grade play had assembled her borrowed costume, and her mind was only partially on geography and reading. Today almost anyone could forget with impunity which was the east side of the map.

As soon as afternoon classes were over, delegates from their home towns began coming to call on some of the girls. They invariably brought parcels from home: perhaps new clothes, certainly new homemade cloth shoes, something good to eat, and a little spending money. They were simple gifts, usually long-wished-for necessities, but satisfying. With them came news—not a letter, since perhaps no one at home could write—but oral messages, and what was better, a chance to ask the relative or neighbor for details. Since all the roommates and friends shared in the excitement if not in the contents of the packages, there were few who did not find the day a welcome break in the routine of school life.

Shu-lan kept thinking of her father and wishing he would come. She had no reason to assume that he would be a delegate, but the possibility made her restless. She wanted to know what was happening at Lucky Inn Village. Finally she went to the Rural Service Center where the guests were to be housed. None of the members from New Bridge had come. They were expected on the late afternoon train.

By the time the last delegates were arriving the fifth grade was hurrying through its supper to start putting on costumes and make-up for the play, since the program was

to begin at seven. Chinese entertainments, especially when they include theatricals, customarily go on for hours, and there was no reason to stint the pleasure of the church members from the country. The older students would continue the program until nearly midnight, but Shu-lan had been assured that only the opening speech of welcome and the answering response by one of the delegates would precede her girls' performance. Their part would be over and they would be free to go home to bed as soon after eight o'clock as they wished.

Several skillful and experienced high-school girls helped the little actresses with their costumes. Miss Fu had seen to that. She was on hand early with girls and servants ready to run back to school for forgotten articles or do any other jobs required. Shu-lan discovered that the two or three fifth graders she had asked to help her would have been totally inadequate. With Miss Fu's experience to fall back on, everything went with unexpected smoothness.

The girls, so excited that they ran in and out, never still a minute, seemed twice as many as they were. Even so, they were few compared to the number of boys who were soon swarming about: glee club and Chinese orchestra members, old-style Chinese boxers and fencers, funny men and acrobats. They felt very much at home in their own school, and the presence of girls only inspired them the more to show their importance by making a great deal of noise.

Among them were teachers: the director of the glee club, the dean of studies, a chemistry teacher in charge of a comic skit, Mr. Li with the athletes. Among others she saw Mr. Hu, the husband of her former teacher, and was reminded again of her failure in the social duty she owed his wife. These men loitered about serenely conscious that nothing was out of control and that all would shortly ap-

pear on the stage in order.

Thanks to their assistants, Miss Fu and Shu-lan were not too busy. They went to look through an open door at the assembling audience. There were about six hundred people in the big room — delegates, local church members, neighbors from the village, and students. Everybody wanted to enjoy the fun. Shu-lan's heart began to beat faster.

"I do hope the children do well," she said nervously, not knowing that Mr. Li had come up and was standing behind her, on his way through the door into the assembly room. Miss Fu nodded to him cordially and he answered Shu-lan with a chuckle.

"I'm afraid we teachers worry about it more than they do. I'm always the one, not the youngsters, whose face gets red if the tumblers actually tumble. What are yours going to do?" His voice was low and singularly pleasing.

"We give a play," Shu-lan answered.

"Well, good luck!" he wished her as he went by.

Just then she saw her father in the audience and suddenly she was glad she had not heard the news from home. Tomorrow would be soon enough. This evening she was going to be free from one kind of anxiety anyway.

Shu-lan was deaf to the two short speeches which opened the evening's entertainment.

"Slowly!" she whispered as the curtain was ready to go up on the first act of the play. The girls nodded cheerfully. One thing she could count on: They would not be frightened or lose their heads. Within two minutes they had made the crowd laugh. Shu-lan, clutching her manuscript, was the only tense person in the hall. The actors were having an extremely good time, and the audience able for once to hear what the girls were saying, listened more quietly than they usually did. The girls had lived all their childhood among such characters and speech as

they were portraying and they mimicked both with rollicking zest. The audience grinned or laughed aloud at the familiar country sayings.

The play used so little scenery that it took but a few minutes to change it between acts. The performers were elated by their successful beginning. The second act went even better than the first and the third was best of all.

Tears of relief stood in Shu-lan's eyes when the last curtain went down and the girls came rushing back from the stage asking breathlessly: "How was it?" "Did we do all right?" "Do you think they could hear?"

"Yes, yes, you did beautifully," she praised them. Then, knowing they were so excited it would be a long time before they could go to sleep, she suggested that they all go and stand at the back of the auditorium to watch the boys' performances for a while before they went home.

An hour after their usual bedtime they were still bright-eyed. She postponed taking them away until everything was finished except the long drama with which the high-school boys would end the program, and then she went with the girls while they picked up their properties backstage. There they ran into Mr. Li.

"Congratulations!" Shu-lan said gaily. "The tumblers didn't tumble down."

Mr. Li stopped. "Thank you," he said with a smile. "But, seriously, I want to congratulate the teacher who trained the girls in that play. I was standing against the back wall of the hall and could hear very comfortably. Usually they talk too fast without enough regard for the audience and nobody behind the tenth row gets a word. Tonight's was the best acting I've ever seen Pilgrim girls do."

Two others of the boys' school faculty came by and stopped to praise the fifth-grade play. The compliments were even sweeter because she was surrounded by her students who were drinking them in. Shu-lan's cheeks were

pink and she did not know what to say. The evening had been more successful than she had dared to hope.

Shu-lan and Second Brother though on adjacent campuses almost never saw each other. None of his friends had ever shown any interest in Shu-lan or needed to use him as messenger. He himself had no use for girls. He was never tempted to call on his sister as a means of meeting her friends. His refusal to consider marriage before he was twenty-five, which had so angered his mother, was neither sudden nor casual. He had thought about the subject and discussed it at length with friends of similar opinions. From personal taste and as a national policy he was opposed to early marriages. If he had been a little boy, Shu-lan would naturally have felt it necessary to keep in constant touch, but a young man of his age required no mothering by an older sister. As a matter of fact, he was only a year younger than she and had long been independent and restive under any feminine interference in his affairs. Thus it came about that the two might almost have been strangers. She was therefore surprised to see him right after breakfast on Saturday. Wang Ma knew him barely well enough to let him into the courtyard unchallenged.

"Can I do any errands for you in Peking?" he asked his sister. "Today all the seniors our school is recommending for scholarships at the university have to go into the city to make application. Then we'll go again later for the special examinations."

"Good for you!" Shu-lan exclaimed. "You must have been doing well! I hear that if you are good enough for Pilgrim to sponsor you, you're pretty sure of a scholarship."

Second Brother was shyly proud of the honor but he changed the subject. "We've borrowed bicycles and we're going to ride along the railroad track."

"Who's going with you?"

"Johnnie Lin."

"Johnnie!" Shu-lan teased. "You Pilgrim boys with your English names! I suppose you have one too."

"Yes, mine's George Washington," he answered soberly. "But I generally use just George. You know it's an American custom to name an insignificant child for a great man, and it's not considered disrespectful, as it is here in China."

"It's a good name," Shu-lan agreed.

"By the way, I went to the entertainment last night. I thought the topic of your play was very much to the point. In fact in my opinion that was the best thing on the program."

"That's only flattery!" Shu-lan said, pleased with his praise. Then she asked abruptly: "Did you talk to father? What did he say about me?"

"It appears that our mother can't decide which of us two is more wicked or has brought her more sorrow. She had thought I was the worst child she had because I wasn't willing to accept as my wife anybody she might pick out for her second daughter-in-law." He grinned at his sister. "Now she inclines to the opinion that there's nothing worse than a girl who'd try to break her engagement. The whole village agrees with her, father says. They think the world's come to an end."

"I knew mother would be very angry with me."

"Angry! It seems she not only flew into an awful rage but that she keeps it up! I suppose you can't blame her. Every time she sees one of the neighbors, or even thinks of one, it stirs her all up again, knowing what they're all saying." He ended with a chuckle. "And Mrs. Wu won't be a comfort!"

"You don't seem to feel any disgrace yourself at all," Shu-lan commented with wonder. "And don't you realize—I'll never be able to go home again!" Tears came into her eyes.

"Nonsense!" retorted Second Brother. "The day'll come when you'll look back and think you were a smart girl."

"Do you really think so?"

"Sure thing! Don't forget you're going through the worst of it right now, or rather our parents are, while it's still news. After a while, folks won't talk about it so much. But listen here! No matter what anybody says or does, you're not to give in and marry Wu. If you don't want him, that's reason enough without mentioning any other, though I hear there are others." He spoke earnestly, almost with anger, looking at her now with serious, troubled eyes. Shu-lan realized that Second Brother was as mature in thought as she, and that this topic was one on which he had developed strong convictions.

"Does father know that I may have to pay quite a lot of money?" Shu-lan asked him next. "That is, I will if I'm able to get out of the marriage at all."

"He didn't tell me, but I wondered if there might be something of the sort involved."

"I'm sorry, because it means I can't send any money home until I've paid back whatever I have to borrow. And if you get into the university —"

"Yes, I confess I had hoped that perhaps you could help some on books and such things. But with things as they are now, you mustn't feel any responsibility for me. The money I need will have to come from somewhere else. Nothing is to interfere with your getting your freedom." His eyes looked straight into hers with a firmness of purpose and a loyalty that made her feel suddenly strong. "I only wish I could help you in some way," he added.

"You are helping me," Shu-lan assured him. "But as a matter of fact, the Wus haven't yet agreed to bargain. All that's happened so far is that mother promised them my wedding day could be on the twentieth of this moon,

which is about two weeks away."

She had already gone in thought so far along the way toward breaking her engagement that this statement to Second Brother of the actual situation brought her back with a jolt. Realization of the facts were dispiriting.

"It must never happen!" he exclaimed, and seeing that she looked a little downcast, he added: "Don't be afraid. You're doing the right thing. Stick to it even if it costs a lot and makes the whole family uncomfortable." He spoke with assurance and good cheer. Shu-lan was discovering this morning a new grown-up Second Brother whom she found surprisingly attractive. "Well, I'm off!" he said.

Shu-lan called after him, "Take your sweater and put it on when you aren't riding so you won't catch cold."

"Aye!" he promised.

After Second Brother had gone, Shu-lan wondered when she could see her father. The delegates would be in business meetings all day. He would certainly come at the end of their afternoon session. Her anticipation was not pleasant. Mr. Chien had been through two weeks of his wife's scolding. By now his endurance must be nearly exhausted, and perhaps he was ready to take it out on the cause of all the trouble. Whether he was patient and cowed, so that she would suffer in sympathy; or whether he was cross from being nagged, so that she would be scolded, Shu-lan dreaded her talk with him.

But she also had more pleasant thoughts. The weather felt like spring at last, the air soft and the sun warm. The tops of the willow trees which lined both sides of the city moat north of the school, looked as though a painter had washed their brown branches with pale green. Along the south sides of walls wherever the light snow had lain, tiny blades of grass were showing. Surest sign of all, red-coated babies were being sunned on doorsteps by grandfathers, and the street was bright with gaudy garments of little

children at play. They waylaid the vendor of sweets and made leisurely choice. Then they clustered around him as he waited while they ate what they had selected, before giving him their money.

Often during the day Shu-lan thought of Second Brother. She was glad that it was such beautiful weather for his trip to Peking, cycling along with his thoughts on the university: fear of its entrance examinations, anxiety over its expensiveness, and hope that its joys would be his. She shared the hope. Since their talk in the morning she had begun to appreciate Second Brother as she never had before.

Also through the day ran the memory of the evening before. She savored again its success. It had been thoughtful of Mr. Li and the other men to compliment her on the play, especially since they had done it within hearing of her students. The men must have realized how inexperienced she was and how anxious she had been to make a success of her part of the program.

It was four o'clock when her father came to see her. He was subdued, and found it harder to talk than usual. Having heard her brother's report, Shu-lan decided to try to justify herself in her father's eyes. She told him the steps which had led to her resolution, and all that had happened, except the attitude of her two brothers.

He listened without interruption, but the juggling of one knee and frequent movement of his hands betrayed to Shu-lan that he was inwardly greatly perturbed. She told about her attempt to borrow money from Mr. Ning, and how the next day at the coalyard Miss Fu had secured for her two hundred dollars which were ready in the school office waiting for Carter Sung's next visit. She did not ask his advice or permission, but informed him carefully of what she planned to do. He might not give his consent but she did not wish that her own father should be

ignorant of what other people knew.

"Your mother says she will not be disgraced by her own child. There's nothing for you to do but marry Wu," he finally said, as if that was the answer to everything she had told him.

Shu-lan was not yet in a position to contradict her mother. She would have to wait and see whether her negotiations through Carter Sung were successful. So she changed the subject and did her best to cheer her father. She gave him a chance to talk about the meeting. She asked him how he had liked the fifth-grade play.

After a while she was pleased to see that he was beginning to be in a happier frame of mind. Then the sound of rapid footsteps interrupted them. The runner was already inside the yard. Through the window Shu-lan could see a schoolboy coming. She met him at the door.

"Oh, Miss Chien —" he panted, then seeing her father, addressed him instead. "Is this Mr. Chien? They thought I might find you here. Your son and Johnnie Lin have been carried off by bandits!"

Shu-lan's heart stopped. "Bandits!"

Mr. Chien jumped to his feet. "What? Where? How do you know?" Father and daughter asked the questions together.

"There was a Li boy with them and he dropped his bicycle and hid behind a tree, and then he ran. But those two had borrowed wheels so they hung onto them, and the last this Li boy saw, they were surrounded. He just got here, and he's all worn out from running, but if you'll come over to the school you can ask him for yourself."

Mr. Chien had forgotten everything else as he followed the boy without even a glance of farewell to his daughter. She stood in the middle of her little room unable to move, seeing again Second Brother as he had left her that morning. Where was he now? And when would she see him again?

Tears were running down her cheeks. In a daze she sat on the edge of her bed. Then suddenly she threw herself against the folded comforters, sobbing. "My brother! O God, don't let them hurt him!" she prayed brokenly, her imagination recalling one after another the stories she had heard of tortures and atrocities at the hands of bandits. Surely they would at least beat him! She shuddered. Second Brother was not a tough, hard boy. He would not be able to endure very much, and then? No one would watch over him or care what happened. Or perhaps they might refuse to give him food! Or water! And how cold it was! He had no comforter with him — only the sweater, if he had really taken it, and they might rob him even of that. They were sure to be rough, coarse men. Second Brother might have to watch them abuse their other victims. Poor George Washington with his high hopes of going to the university!

After an hour Shu-lan jumped up and went to find her father. She wanted all the information there was, and wondered if there were any plans for rescue. She started toward the boys' school, then realizing that considerable time had elapsed decided to try the Rural Service Center instead. The delegates were eating their early supper and it was evident that they were excited by what had happened. But when Shu-lan was able to talk to her father, he could tell her nothing more. She went back to her room.

There were voices inside and when she opened the door she found Miss Fu, Miss Shang, Miss Tien the sixth-grade teacher, and Miss Pan. They had just heard the news and since they knew so little about it, had to go over and over the few facts that were known adding theories and conjectures, but in all their talk trying not to add to Shu-lan's anxiety. Her friends did not want to be out after dark so in less than a half hour they had to go home. Their presence had comforted her, but after they were gone she was

again unable to keep back the tears.

The room grew dark, and still she found no relief. After a while someone opened the door softly and came in. "Don't cry so!" Wang Ma's voice said persuasively. "I'm sure you're thinking of all the things that can happen to your brother. But sometimes bandits don't act the way you expect. One time an only son was taken from our village and his father was wild because no demand for ransom came and no news. Then ten days later here came the boy back not a bit hurt. I always say you just can't predict what they'll do." She paused a moment, and getting no answer, went on. "I know you're not hungry, but I brought you some millet porridge, and now that I've taken the trouble —"

Shu-lan sat up and wiped her eyes. She did not have the heart to refuse what was brought with such simple kindness and loyalty. Wang Ma was pouring some water into the washbasin. Like a little girl once more, Shu-lan obediently washed her face, then ate the hot gruel.

Meanwhile Wang Ma had been talking steadily, telling more stories of bandits, how in the midst of all their horrors, their main idea is always to get as much as possible for themselves. "Rest your heart!" she urged. "They won't hurt those two schoolboys tonight. At least they'll inquire whether their fathers are rich, before they do anything much to them."

"And when they find out we aren't?" Shu-lan faltered.

"No telling at all!" Wang Ma answered. "That's a problem for next week. Nobody can do anything about it now."

"But brother hasn't even a comforter!"

"Crying about it won't weave him one," Wang Ma pointed out, but she said it sympathetically.

The next morning Shu-lan's pretty face was serious as she sat in church. Miss Pan had come to walk with her and

had been unusually quiet on the way. Shu-lan noted the curious glances of women and girls sitting around her, but she was too harassed by her thoughts to care.

It was a special occasion since the delegates to the association meeting were all present, but in form the service was as usual. The organist was playing a small reed organ, and the large congregation was quiet and still. Shu-lan found herself beginning to grow calmer. The reverent phrases of the prayers and responses, the hush of a large company joining in acts of adoration, and the earnestness of her own petitions brought her increasing calm, and a sense of proportion.

Shu-lan knew the preacher, a church leader from Peking. He was a small, middle-aged man whose rugged face, covered with wrinkles, revealed a brightness of mind and soul. He spoke with simplicity and earnestness in a strong, rich voice.

The text was, "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

The preacher spoke with simplicity and earnestness, sending a ringing exhortation to the country churches that in every plan and policy, in every act or word, among themselves and toward their non-Christian neighbors they should spend themselves with zealous energy to make this prayer come true.

It was a stirring appeal. Shu-lan could see the girls sitting up straight, as though they could barely wait until the service was over to start on this program of salvation through service. She knew how they felt. She felt the same way herself.

The sermon ended with a prayer of dedication. As she followed the speaker's words and consecrated herself anew to Christian service, Shu-lan was truly at peace.

Her feeling of calmness remained on her way home. Miss Pan and two or three other teachers with whom she was

walking attributed her absorption in her own thoughts to anxiety for her brother. Not wanting to intrude they remarked on the greenness of the willows; wondered how much longer it would be until violets bloomed along the moat; and commented on the people they had seen at church. She could have been diverted by their conversation if she had wished, but they made no effort to gain her attention.



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE FIFTH GRADERS HAD NO PURITANS among their ancestors. For them, Sunday was a joyous holiday. One went to religious services all morning, not through compulsion, but because it was the most interesting and pleasant thing there was to do. The afternoon, too, provided a variety of entertainment, unless imminent examinations drove one to study.

On this Sunday afternoon the girls of Court Eleven, like the babies in the doorways and the children in the street, were reveling in the spring sunshine. It was the warmest day of the season so far. Windows were opened wide and the padded winter curtains had been taken from the doors. Sparrows twittered happily on the tile roofs and under the eaves. Higher overhead pigeons flew back and forth. Sometimes faintly far away, and then again circling nearer and louder, sounded the haunting music made by whistles tied to their tail feathers.

On the narrow brick platform which ran along the front of the house like a long step, lolled a row of girls. In their hands were books or knitting or sewing but, as carefree as a picnic party, they laughed and talked more than they carried on their ostensible occupations. Among them were those who like Amah were ready to clown, and others like Auntie who were equally ready to be amused. At one end two girls were giggling over each other's guesses in "stone, paper, scissors."

Out in the middle of the yard Monkey and Manager, playing together as usual, had rolled up the skirts of their long winter clothes around their waists and were clutching them with both hands while each kept a shuttlecock flying in the air by kicking it. They were a gay moving picture as they hopped, showing the green and purple and red of their inner clothes and linings and tossing their bobbed hair into a tangle. The shuttlecocks were made of several old-fashioned Chinese cash sewed together through the square holes, and buoyed up by a little bunch of brightly dyed chicken feathers.

Two other girls were squatting near by, playing jacks with small round stones. Two more were playing a variety of hopscotch marked out on the dry ground with scratches made by a bit of broken crockery. Near the gate, short-haired Sonny was living up to her tomboy reputation by passably skillful manipulation of a whirring *diabolo*.

Inside, Shu-lan was looking over pictures which had been given to the school. There were hundreds of them, beautifully colored, cut out of magazines by friendly people far away in America. Each teacher would have a chance to go over them, taking out any she could use in the classroom. Shu-lan was looking for those of Chinese places and people. In geography the fifth grade had finished only their native province, and had most of China yet to study. She was finding very few pictures that she could use, but with the leisure of a Sunday afternoon she was enjoying the interesting scenes from other parts of the world, especially those showing the lively Americans and their surprisingly clean streets, and houses not surrounded by courtyard walls.

The girls in Court Eleven were so comfortable and busy in their own big yard inside their own mud wall that it was easy to feel that the rest of the universe mattered little, that the sun shone for them alone, and that the soft spring

air was made purposely for their enjoyment. Shu-lan's thoughts were of the world outside. She had not forgotten her own unsolved problem nor the grave question of Second Brother's misfortune. For the time being, however, in her mind these were an accompaniment in a minor key to the pleasant activities of the hour. With less than full attention she wondered whether any news had come from the bandits and hoped that her father would come to tell her anything he learned.

But when visitors came, they were not bringing news of Second Brother. Sonny was nearest to the street, and hearing the arrival of callers, opened the gate and led them in. They were Mrs. Lang and Mrs. Lo of the New Bridge church. Something about the resolute way they walked toward her across the yard struck Shu-lan with apprehension. The children stared and then remembering their manners hurriedly busied themselves as before.

Shu-lan gave a quick glance around the room to be sure it was not untidy and greeted the two women at the door. She managed to give Sonny a little poke and whisper "tea."

From the first it was plain that her callers were not pleased with her. They kept a semblance of friendliness by talking only formalities until Wang Ma had served the tea, and then spoke bluntly.

"A very bad report has come to us and since you are a member of the New Bridge church it is necessary for us to speak to you."

Shu-lan went to the window and looked out. The sound of voices carried through the paper windows almost the same as through the open air. She was relieved to find that none of the students was near enough to overhear. Meanwhile Mrs. Lang had continued the speech which had obviously been prepared beforehand.

"The Bible says, 'Honor thy father and thy mother,' but we hear that you are preparing to disobey yours in an important matter and so bring to them great shame. Our church committee decided that our attendance at this association meeting offered opportunity to warn you that the church cannot permit such conduct."

Shu-lan was surprised. Her experience was limited but she had never heard of such close supervision over a member. She had always thought of her engagement as a matter which affected only the two families.

"Of course Mr. Wu is also put in an embarrassing position. He is now an important man on our church committee and yet a young member treats him with contempt. Naturally it cannot be permitted. We two were chosen to reason with you and try to turn you from your pride."

"Pride?" Shu-lan echoed.

"What but pride in your own learning made you walk out of our women's meeting only a few Sundays ago?" Mrs. Lang's voice was hard and stern and she set her lips firmly together.

Shu-lan was dismayed. So that was the interpretation they had put on her leaving their women's meeting! It had not seemed important to her. Yet by that simple unpremeditated act she had angered and hurt the pride of these two. Pride? Perhaps sometimes she was guilty of it, but certainly that was not the reason for wanting to avoid marriage with young Wu.

"Mr. Wu told us to say nothing to you, but we cannot be so remiss. Everyone in Lucky Inn Village agrees with Mrs. Wu that you are no Christian or you'd keep your word. The reputation of our church is involved and is at the mercy of a girl's whims. It cannot be allowed."

The little woman, wife of the preacher, had done all the talking. Now her large companion finished her speech for her. Mrs. Lo rose and Mrs. Lang stood beside her. They

were an odd-looking pair, but Shu-lan was not amused. The message they had brought struck her as unfair yet she could not immediately think of an answer. She had no choice but to allow the interview to end.

"We warn you," Mrs. Lo said, "you marry Mr. Wu's son as your father has promised or you get out of our church." The two women departed with no ceremony.

Shu-lan followed them through the yard. They ignored her but their stiff backs indicated that they knew she was there. She was conscious of the many pairs of inquisitive young eyes noting their rudeness in going out of the gate without turning to bow and say farewell.

They almost bumped into Mr. Chien. He bowed and stood to one side, then looked in surprise at the way they were treating his daughter behind them. Crestfallen as she felt, she showed what a relief it was to see her father's kind, slow smile.

"What did they want?" he asked, guessing that their visit had not been purely for sociability.

"I'll tell you when we're inside," Shu-lan said quietly, afraid that the girls might hear or surmise that there was some trouble. "Is there any news of Second Brother?"

"It's known who the bandits are. They're a company of several hundred men with Liu Kuei-tang going back to his old home at Tai Ming in southern Hopei." For ten years this Liu Kuei-tang, roaming the countryside from Manchuria to Shantung, had been a bandit or mercenary soldier in various civil wars, but had always managed to avoid any danger to himself.

"That old reprobate!" Shu-lan exclaimed. "I didn't know he was around here."

"He hasn't been. We hear that he has come a long way across the country and cuts a clean swath. His followers steal everything in their path and they were crossing the railroad track when our boys came along on their wheels.

Bicycles are one of the things Liu's men like best. Perhaps they wanted the wheels as much as they wanted the boys."

Shu-lan and her father had crossed the courtyard and sat in her little room with the door open to the sunshine.

"The teachers at Pilgrim say not to worry too much," Mr. Chien added. "They plan to ask for the boys' release first and if they fail the parents will have to be prepared to pay a ransom."

Shu-lan nodded her head. "I think the school authorities will manage the affair as well as anybody could."

"I trust them too," her father said. "They are more learned in the ways of the world than a farmer like me. I told them to do as they thought best."

They sat in silence a minute. Then Mr. Chien pointed with his chin toward the gate. "What about those two?" he asked.

Shu-lan's face clouded. "I think it's unjust! They say I must marry the Wus' son or they'll put me out of the church." Her lips trembled. "They say I'm not a Christian!" With this she broke down entirely and began to cry.

"How could it be that a girl must marry any particular man in order to prove that she is a Christian? That's not right," her father decided. "That certainly is managing other people's business."

Shu-lan continued to cry quietly and made no answer. What was there to say?

"This isn't their affair," her father muttered again crossly. "Why do they poke into it?" He sat looking at the floor, meditating.

After a minute or two he looked up suddenly. "Of course I don't pretend it's pleasant for your mother and me, your getting this notion about your engagement," he said in a different tone of voice. "We've eaten a lot of bitterness. Lucky Inn Village has had a great deal to say. Nobody likes to be laughed at."

Shu-lan could imagine the mortification this reticent statement covered. But with his next words her self-reproach was changed to dismay.

"I'm afraid it's all for nothing. I don't think you can do anything else but marry him on the twentieth."

"What? Not get out of it?" Shu-lan looked at her father in horror. "Oh! but I can't marry him! Even if I have to pay twice as much money!"

"That's just it," her father explained slowly. "You mustn't use that two hundred dollars. We must have that ready and waiting to ransom Second Brother. Can't you see that? And it may not be enough. The school isn't sure of getting him back. We must have plenty of cash on hand whenever it's needed. It's hard on you but this is no time to give money to the Wus just to avoid getting married. Your brother must be saved."

Shu-lan felt sick all over. Her father took for granted that her precious two hundred dollars must be used for Second Brother. How could she make him see otherwise? Her father had land. Why could he not mortgage it and borrow money? Or was it possible that he was right and she was wrong? Marrying Wu now would be ten times harder than before she had planned to be free from him. How could she stand it? But if she had to choose between her freedom and her brother's could she be happy while she let him suffer?

Suddenly she seemed to see Second Brother standing again in the early-morning sunlight and she heard again his earnest words, "No matter what anybody says or does, you're not to give in and marry Wu." If he were speaking from his present imprisonment would he say that? If she only knew whether he was in danger! "Nothing is to interfere with your getting your freedom," he had said.

She had not told these things to her father and she could not tell him now. If her parents were ever to find out to

what extent her brothers had taken her part, the information would have to come from her brothers themselves. She thought intently, trying to decide what Second Brother would say now, if he could give her advice. In her mind she still saw him with the unclouded memory of that last conversation. His eyes were clear, his face serious and sympathetic and he seemed to say the same words as before, "Nothing is to interfere."

"I'm sorry, father!" Shu-lan said softly. "The money I borrowed to buy my freedom from the Wus is only for that one use. We can't keep it for Second Brother. My affairs can't wait. When the time comes, his ransom will have to be found from some other source."

Her father's face hardened. He sat stiff and motionless, as he said: "Isn't it enough to disobey and disgrace your parents? Your mother has been saying you are no longer our child and that you must never come home. She says I have been too softhearted. This now may be a matter of your brother's life! If you aren't willing to help, you do indeed put yourself out of our family. There is no other way to explain it. You compel a man's anger to rise!" He stood up and started out, as though he could not bear to be in the room with her any longer. Then at the door he turned and said: "Once more I tell you, you are not to put your comfort before your brother's life. You must pay that money toward his ransom any minute they ask for it. Oh, my son!" It was plain that he was both hurt and deeply angry at what he judged her selfishness and stubbornness.

For the second time that afternoon Shu-lan disconsolately followed a caller through the gorgeous sunshine to the gate.

"Father, please—" she sobbed when she found he was really leaving her.

He turned to face her once more. His hard brown face

was stern. " I go home on tonight's train. I wash my hands of you. But my son's life must be saved! "

While she held her breath, he was gone.

Monday dawned with a haze over the horizon and by nine o'clock the wind had begun to blow. No one was surprised when before noon a great yellow cloud of dust from the faraway Gobi desert was obscuring all objects. The fifth-grade girls studied their lessons without much enthusiasm. The association meeting with its excitement was over. There was nothing to look forward to. Besides, something was wrong with their teacher. It would have taken a much cleverer actress than she to hide that fact. They supposed her brother's disappearance accounted for her abstraction and their sympathy made them docile. Now they wished good news would come of the kidnaped students so she would be happy again!

Shu-lan's heart was torn by conflict. Her regret at causing her father grief and anger was all the more painful because, having struggled with the problem all night, she had become convinced that she was right. Yet, if she persisted in her present plan she could not easily regain her father's favor. She faced with dismay the possibility of a long estrangement from him. If it must be, she would have to bear it. She could not adopt any other path than that which she had decided upon.

Her dread lest she be put out of the church was mingled with chagrin at her inability to say even one word in her own defense, and against what she felt was an injustice. Like her father, she could not see why the only way she could show she was a Christian was by going through with the proposed marriage.

As to her brother, she was faced with panic. Possibly he was so fortunate that he still remained unharmed after the

many days he had been in the power of those wicked, cruel men. It was not likely.

Along with these distressing thoughts and most alarming of all, was the fear that Carter Sung might not return. Every time she thought of such a possibility her heart jumped with dread of what that would mean for her. It was almost a week since his last visit. Was he negotiating with the Wus? Or had he dropped the idea? She looked out of the window into the dust storm. It was certain that he would not come in such weather. She would have to be patient at least one more day.

The tedious irritating hours dragged along. Desks, books, and papers were gritty with dust. The paper ventilating curtains in the windows flapped a noisy accompaniment to voices raised in competition against the wind which roared around the buildings from one court to another. At last it was time to dismiss the children without any games, letting them run to the dormitories or their homes to try to find some refuge from the all-pervading yellow dust. Instead of going to her own room, Shu-lan went restlessly into the office. She had half intended to talk to Miss Fu but gave up the idea when she found five or six teachers there. She had just answered their inquiries by saying that she had heard no news of her brother when the door opened and Mr. Li walked in. He spoke to Miss Fu and then looking across the room at Shu-lan said, "Miss Chien, may I speak to you also?"

As soon as they were seated at Miss Fu's desk, Mr. Li on the opposite side from Miss Fu and Shu-lan at one end, he turned to her.

"First, I'll give you the good news we've just received about your brother. The principal commissioned me to carry it because he saw me on the way over here."

Shu-lan's eyes were bright. "Have the two boys been freed?"

"Well, no," Mr. Li answered. "It's not such good news as that! I'm afraid we can hardly expect it so soon. But they were seen alive and unharmed yesterday." His eyes were serious. "We're all thankful that what might have been tragic looks hopeful and we'll trust that the final outcome will be completely happy."

"Where were they yesterday?" Miss Fu inquired, eagerly.

"At Niu Pao Tun." He looked inquiringly at Shu-lan. "I suppose your father told you that the bandits are Liu Kuei-tang's men. They're going across country and by last evening had arrived at Niu Pao Tun, where they stopped for the night and carried on whatever deviltry they chose. No one in the town got a wink of sleep."

"How did you hear?"

"By one of our school workmen. His home's there. He'd gone out Saturday on his bicycle but he had to walk back in all this dust. He's lost everything he owned and says the same is true of everybody in town."

"Poor things!" exclaimed Shu-lan. "But what about my brother?"

"This man saw both the boys but couldn't speak to them. They were prisoners along with a few others, but seemed in good spirits. He said they were walking as though they felt all right. I fear someone else was riding the bicycles."

"What is the plan for getting them back?"

"It's like this. You know Liu considers himself a general and his main interest right now is in getting into the regular army. His men are bandits but not just ordinary kidnapers whose chief aim is to capture people and hold them for ransom."

"You don't dare have anyone go to see him, do you?"

"Not directly. He's enough of a bandit so that we're working through a man who's supposed to be on good

terms with him. But since Liu aims at being a high military man we are also using the method we would use in approaching such an official."

"Then I suppose you've sent an impressive-looking letter in a big envelope with a lot of seals?" Miss Fu suggested.

"Yes, we've sent a formal claim written in very polite language. We hope he'll consider our school of sufficient importance to send a courteous answer to our request for the boys' release, and of course we want an affirmative one. When we hear from that we'll know what to do next."

"Father thought he'd have to pay a ransom. Do you think so?" Shu-lan faltered. How she wished he would say "no!"

"He may. Then he may not. Since Liu is not just a kidnaper, it's hard to guess. Don't worry, anyway. I'm sure the boys will get out unharmed. Even bandits respect learning and fortunately both these two have the manner of scholars. They won't get into trouble by being rude, as some fellows would."

Mr. Li's cheerful tone was as reassuring as his words. Shu-lan was reminded how his praise of the fifth-grade play had elated her. He turned to Miss Fu. He was apparently not conscious of being the only man in an office full of women teachers. He sat alert but at ease, dressed in a long padded garment of brown heather mixture and looking less athletic than in his Western-style clothes. Shu-lan studied his good-humored strong face. In front of his left ear was a small brown mole. She felt a bit brazen. She could not remember ever before having looked at any young man's face closely enough to notice such a detail. The faces of men she knew well — her teachers, church leaders, or workmen — were all middle-aged or old. She had only begun to discover Second Brother as an interesting personality. Certainly she had no clear picture of young Wu for all

she had looked at him so hard.

"I have another topic to discuss," Mr. Li was saying, "or to be more accurate, a request to make. The Rural Service Center is helping the people of Yang Chuang to hold a fair this Saturday. They have arranged for a public-health exhibit and some talks, and agricultural demonstrations, and so on. Among other things they want two or three hours of entertainment and asked me to find it for them."

He turned to Shu-lan. "I wonder if you'd be willing to repeat for them that good play you gave the other night?"

Miss Fu answered for her. "Of course! She and the girls will be flattered that you think it's good enough!" Shu-lan smiled assent.

"One reason I like it," Mr. Li continued, "is because it portrayed an idea which I'd like to see driven into the heads of village women. Yang Chuang is only two miles away from these schools that have been here sixty years, and yet I'll guarantee that most of the old ladies in that village think of marriage as something arranged for the convenience of the mother-in-law, just as you pictured it in that play. Nearly half the boys in Pilgrim are married because their mothers wish it, and the boys are hardly acquainted with their wives. I've no patience with such old-fashioned notions!" He had become quite vehement in his denunciation and stopped abruptly, laughing. "Sorry! I'm scolding the wrong people. Then you'll put on the play?"

"We'll be glad to," Shu-lan promised. "What time will you want it?"

"As soon after noon as convenient. Those people eat two meals a day so we'll get the largest audience of women between eleven and two. But I suppose you'll be having school till twelve and can't leave until after lunch."

"We'll make up some classes before Saturday so we can

finish at ten," Shu-lan decided. " And we'll think up some scheme for lunch."

" The program's just a medley anyway," Mr. Li said. " We can adjust to your convenience. Thank you very much for helping me out."

As Shu-lan went back to Court Eleven she was unconscious of the cold, though the balmy air of the day before was forgotten, and winter had returned. She did not notice the dust and wind which had irritated her almost beyond endurance all day. She still had no assurance that her engagement could be broken in the nine days which still remained before the wedding date. Her father and mother were angry with her. Her native village agreed with them that her conduct was a disgrace. Her church had decided that she was not worthy to be called a Christian. And yet she was not unhappy.

She thought her good spirits were accounted for by the fact that Second Brother was safe.



CHAPTER NINE

ON TUESDAY THE DUST STORM CONTINUED. The wind was cold. Fine yellow powder covered everything and had made its unwelcome way into every crevice. Nerves jangled, but not in the fifth grade! There all was content, in the prospect of a jaunt on Saturday and enthusiasm for the proposed project.

"That's Curly's village!" the girls exclaimed when Shu-lan relayed Mr. Li's invitation.

"So it is!" On the previous day she had not remembered the fact. The nickname described a slight wave in what ought to have been regulation straight black hair. Shu-lan knew Curly as a well-dressed, well-behaved, quiet, healthy child who knew her lessons and was never absent except when the weather was too bad for her to walk the two miles that separated home and school. Now she became the focus of fifth-grade attention.

She stood shyly when Shu-lan looked inquiringly at her. "I knew about the fair on Saturday, but I didn't know that anybody would go from our school," she explained.

"She knows about it because her father is the headman of the village," a more talkative schoolmate jumped up to volunteer.

"We can go to Curly's house to leave our things and dress for the play," another suggested.

They never lacked ideas. Now they bobbed up one after another to propose or reject them and could be counted on

to vote down impractical ones. Having planned their outing they settled back to lessons contentedly.

Shu-lan looked out of the window with disgust at the weather. She had hoped it would be clear and that perhaps Carter Sung would come today. And what about Second Brother? If she could only be sure he was not cold or hungry! But the children's good spirits were infectious. She could not remain altogether downhearted. So the day passed without any special reminder of her difficulties, and before night the storm had blown itself out. Perhaps tomorrow some good news would come.

By Wednesday morning Curly's status in the fifth grade had changed. She had become important. At the corner of the school grounds four or five blue-uniformed, red-sweated classmates awaited her arrival in hopes of being first to learn the newest details of preparations at Yang Chuang. She was barely in time for the bell but they were not disappointed. With her came a middle-aged farmer whom she led to their classroom and introduced to Shu-lan as her father. Since there was a guest present, the girls as they came in continued to stand politely by their desks. Before Mr. Chou spoke, he bowed ceremoniously and they all returned his bow. Then to their delight they heard what he had come to say. He turned his back to the girls and addressed to their teacher his invitation and short explanation.

"We have no way to recompense the young ladies for the bother of coming so long a journey and of wearying themselves by performing their clever play. My stupid girl here suggested that the classmates who are not acting can come too, and help prepare dumplings. We have only poor country food but none need return hungry. I hope the young ladies will not laugh at us." He made his polite apologies slowly but with the composure of a man whose family has for generations enjoyed the respect of its neighbors.

Shu-lan thanked him graciously and went to the door with him. There he exchanged bows with them all again in farewell.

As soon as he was out of sight the grinning fifth graders began to dance noiselessly up and down making the motions of clapping their hands. They knew that his formal words of disparagement foretold a jolly time together ending with an unlimited supply of tasty dumplings filled with chopped cabbage and pork and flavored with garlic. As for the task of helping to prepare them, those who had no part in the play would come into their own, for pinching the dumplings into shape is half the fun.

When he had gone, Curly added a little information. "Father is inviting to dinner at our house all the people from this compound who are helping with the program, but we girls don't have to make the dumplings for so many. There are plenty of women to do the work. We'll only make them for fun. He says the boys can eat first and get out of our way. He will not break custom by having the boys and girls together. But he said he thought all the teachers could eat at one time." Then she added in a loud whisper, "Because there are a few other dishes besides dumplings for them."

The whole class giggled. Curly had naïvely betrayed a secret, but it was a secret they had all guessed.

During the next few days they worked hard perfecting their play, knowing that this time they would be giving it out-of-doors to a noisy audience. The girls took their responsibility seriously, both for their part in the program and also for the good impression they must try to make on the village women. Big sisterly exhortations were given to Monkey and the other more vivacious members of the class that for one day they must act as demurely as though they had never been out of their grandmothers' presence. Not even on the way to and from Yang Chuang could there be

any unmaidenly romping or noisy talk or laughter lest, because of their conduct, modern education for girls be brought into disrepute. Their life in school was so free that old-fashioned etiquette was not habitual with them. However, they were all good enough actresses to appear with such conventional decorum as would be acceptable to rural matrons, especially since for this role too they could practice in advance as much as they deemed necessary.

Naturally lessons and preparations for Saturday kept Shu-lan busy in spite of the undercurrent of anxiety about Second Brother and Carter Sung which often obtruded itself.

At last, on Thursday, Mr. Sung arrived. He came at his own convenience and so, as before, interrupted classwork. Shu-lan had double reason for hurrying to the little reception room. She could hardly wait. She tried to discover by looking at him what news he brought from the Wus, but his fat face was stolidly noncommittal. She was compelled to listen to what he considered the proper speeches until at last he seemed to be leading up to the negotiations.

Then Shu-lan interrupted him. "So they think they could be satisfied with some other girl as daughter-in-law if they were comforted by a little money. Is that right?" Her heart beat fast, waiting.

"About like that," Mr. Sung agreed. At last she had the word which she had been longing for. She tried to speak calmly.

"Of course they want as much as they can get and even that won't be enough; I want to pay as little as possible and even that will be more than I can easily give; and you want a good commission regardless of what the total amount finally turns out to be. But as I told you before, you all know how much money I'll be able to get hold of, so it's useless to talk empty numbers. Can't we come to terms without bargaining half a day?"

"As you wish," Carter Sung said amiably.

"Then make it a sum within possibility," Shu-lan warned him. Whatever it was, she must pay it. She could never face that marriage.

"Mr. Wu borrowed two hundred dollars to bury his mother and one hundred each for dowries for these last two daughters. If you'll pay four hundred dollars they'll call it a clean slate. There's no reason why they should agree to any less. You must remember they're not the ones who're trying to break the engagement."

"I thought you promised to ask for something within possibility! And your commission would be in addition, I suppose. How much did you plan on for that?" Her voice was a little crisp.

"There's no established custom for breaking an engagement. It isn't like buying and selling land. But I thought perhaps ten per cent."

Shu-lan relaxed a little. "The rate you suggest for the commission seems to be reasonable," she said in a much more friendly tone, "but you know as well as I do that four hundred dollars for the Wus is not reasonable. It would mean I must give them all my salary except what I actually pay for food for three years."

"That's a lot shorter time than you'd work for them if you didn't break your engagement," Mr. Sung reminded her.

"Besides, making the total of Mr. Wu's various debts the basis for this settlement is outrageous. What if he owed three or four thousand? Would he expect me to pay all of that? Shall I tell you how much I have prepared? Two hundred dollars. That's an enormous amount considering that it's pure gain for the Wus. Our family has Second Brother's ransom to worry about. Don't forget that." She paused a moment and smiled at him. "Tell me truly, didn't they agree to about that much as their last price?"

"Mr. Wu said three hundred was the least I should accept, but since we are speaking our thoughts out 'white' as we sometimes say, I'll run the risk of splitting the difference with you. I can't do any better than that."

His manner and tone seemed sincere and almost sympathetic. The thought flashed through her mind that originally she herself had planned on three hundred. Including the interest it would take two years to repay the total he had named. She hesitated only briefly. As Mr. Sung had hinted, the Wus had the upper hand.

"Well, if that's really the best you can offer! Two hundred fifty for Mr. Wu and twenty-five for you — two hundred seventy-five. If you can do your errands inside the city and come back in about an hour and a half, that'll give me enough time to hunt up the other seventy-five dollars."

Carter Sung could not disguise his satisfaction. Shu-lan likewise rejoiced that she began to see light. "Hereafter I'll certainly never step on any path that could lead toward a mother-in-law!" she told herself sternly as she hurried back to the fifth-grade room.

She had saved fifteen dollars in February. Between classes she drew ten in advance on her March salary from the school treasurer and borrowed another fifty from Miss Fu, securing also her promise to be present at the coming interview.

It was after school, when she had the actual cash in her hands, counted and ready to pay out, that she wavered. She sat at one side of the office while other teachers went in and out or loitered about chatting of their own affairs. She looked at the little parcel wrapped in a bit of newspaper. Her father had given her an explicit command not to use the money for herself. She was planning within half an hour to disobey him. She could see her father's worried face, and then her brother's, young and sensitive. If only some sure word had come from him before she needed to

act! Once paid, the money could never be hers again no matter how deeply she might repent her decision and wish she had saved it for her brother. It was still not too late. Should she even now obey her parents and sacrifice herself to make sure they would have enough money for a ransom? Once before, Second Brother had seemed to tell her to run the risk of his getting out some other way. But what if she had been wrong? If he came to harm — if he lost his life, perhaps — she would never forgive herself nor deserve her parents' forgiveness. If she only knew!

Up until now, she could always say, "It's not too late to change my mind." But in a few minutes she must decide one way or the other. Unconscious of the laughter and talk around her, she prayed fervently. Then when the memory of Second Brother's words seemed to come as a response, she dared not trust it as she had trusted it before. Surely her intense desire to be free must bias the answer she heard.

"Come on," Miss Fu said, "let's go to the reception room to wait."

Shu-lan's face was pale and strained. Miss Fu, guessing the difficulty, encouraged her. "Don't worry! It's all right. I'm sure of it." She squeezed Shu-lan's hand to comfort her and smiled in the sweet friendly way which had long had the power to make Pilgrim girls trust her.

"I wish I could be sure!" Shu-lan's lips said without a sound.

They did not have long to wait. Carter Sung was prompt. Now that an agreement had been made, he lapsed into a simpler, more everyday manner. Being also in a hurry to start home he carried on their business with dispatch. With Miss Fu as witness, he produced a receipt for the money.

"I'll get something from Mr. Wu," he promised, "which will guarantee that they'll have no more to say. I'll bring it to you in a few days."

"You'd better have Mrs. Wu and their oldest son included," Shu-lan said, "because otherwise I should always be afraid that one of them would start something, especially the son."

"Rest your heart. I'll take care of that, with plenty of witnesses in the village. Everybody knows all about it anyway," Mr. Sung said with a grin. "Don't say it outside, Miss Chien, but I confess I think you've managed this affair very wisely. There are questions asked about how young Wu spends his time and where he gets his money, with his father having a hard time to get over the days. You're well out of it."

Miss Fu's eyes sparkled. She was evidently pleased with her part in freeing her former pupil from the future she had dreaded.

Shu-lan's face also was calmer. "I suppose you can still find him a wife for all that," she answered Mr. Sung.

"For a commission!" he replied.

When he was gone with the money and there was no turning back Shu-lan tried to feel the exultant triumph she had expected to enjoy once she should be free. As she returned to her room, she chided herself. Why could she not rejoice in the victory won, and defer Second Brother's problem until it was more definite? She ought to be walking on air! But when she was not imagining her brother in discomfort, she was remembering her father's sorrow and anger, and was sick at heart.



CHAPTER TEN

BY SATURDAY, IT WAS SPRING AGAIN, A BEAUTIFUL day for the fifth-graders' excursion. Only they, of all the school, were dismissed at ten o'clock. To call attention to their importance they bustled about getting ready for departure as noisily as they dared. Ricksha Rider's mother had refused permission for her to go. Her classmates, often so callous, shook their heads and clicked their tongues in pity as they watched her and her book bag disappear into her father's ricksha. To have such a mother!

At last they were off, two by two in a long column, each with her best friend as partner, and all neatly alike with black bobbed hair and dark-blue uniforms over whatever patterns or colors their winter clothes happened to be. The costumes and properties for the play had been made into bundles, wrapped in yard squares of bright cloth with the opposite corners tied for handles. Each actress was responsible for her own paraphernalia but her friends would take turns helping her carry it. There would be no laziness about that. Shu-lan walked along behind or at the side of the column. The day was perfect. The sun shone warm. Only a dull, hard heart would not have responded and expanded with the new life of spring all around them.

Curly led the way. They went out through the adjacent village where the dogs ignored them, recognizing them as unimportant — just some more of the students who were always coming and going on the village streets. The girls

walked sedately but in the gayest of spirits, twittering and giggling softly with their partners. Vegetable and meat peddlers were making their rounds, their whole stock accommodated in baskets slung at the ends of carrying poles. Housewives interrupted their selection of supplies to look at the procession of schoolgirls. Recognizing one of the neighbor children in the group, a woman would call out, "Where are you going?" The girl addressed would call back, "To the fair at Yang Chuang," proud to be doing something out of the ordinary.

Leaving the village they walked along a dusty cart road, worn by the travel of centuries until it was like a wide ditch so deep that the girls' heads barely showed above the edges of the bordering fields. The ground looked perfectly dry. There had been no rain yet and during the winter very little snow. In spite of that, the wheat had grown into thick green rows. Here and there among the fifth graders might be a farmer's daughter who observed that the crop was starting well. Most of them however took no conscious notice, though the fresh greenness of the sprouting grain was as much a cause of their joy in the springtime as were the bursting buds in the tops of the willows and the brightness of the sunshine. They ignored the wheat, but they saw every violet that had ventured to bloom. These were the first of the season. Whoever spied one on the north slope by the road ran out of line to pick it, but there were so few that by the time they reached Yang Chuang not more than ten girls wore blossoms stuck into the little loops which fastened the shoulder buttons of their uniforms.

Pilgrim students seldom went away from the school, and never for an idle hike into the country. It was not the sort of thing their parents would have approved. In their planning they had spoken of the journey on Saturday as if it would be a long one. They could therefore scarcely believe it when word was relayed back from the head of the line

that the clump of big trees ahead marked their destination. About twenty ancient pines, a landmark for miles, towered high above a large group of graves by the side of the road just outside the village. Long before the girls arrived they were sighted by three or four small children and a capering dog. These seemed to be connected with Curly because they watched the girls a minute or two and then scampered away as if carrying news. From all directions little groups of people were moving toward the village. All the surrounding countryside must have been invited to share in the holiday. The girls quickened their pace. They too were unwilling to miss anything.

Once on the village street they could hear gongs and cymbals and the shrill falsetto of Chinese vocal music above the mingled noises of a crowd. They passed entrances to a dozen or more residences, turned a corner, and came out into an open space full of people. At the farther and lower side, and directly opposite the entrance to a temple the girls were now passing, was an old brick stage twenty-five or thirty feet long, its floor four or five feet above the level of the ground. It belonged to the whole village and was for the use of traveling troupes of professional actors who might be hired at any time to come and perform in fulfillment of a private vow or to express public thanksgiving. The stage was freshly walled with grass mats.

Before it on rows of uncomfortable high narrow benches like sawhorses, three or four hundred people sat in the sunshine. Children and grownups too were going back and forth, talking aloud with their friends, and buying things to eat from the peddlers who passed around the edges of the crowd. Everyone was enjoying himself in whatever way he preferred while on the stage seven or eight Pilgrim boys performed part of an old and well-known Chinese historical opera.

The girls caught only a glimpse of what was going on.

People who stood in their way hastily stepped to one side and Curly led the line through the crowd without slackening her pace. There was no chatting with partners now. Every girl was a model of decorum walking straight and prim. "Girl students!" people exclaimed in admiration. Villagers seldom saw at one time so many girls who knew how to read. Their own daughters, dressed rustic fashion in jackets short enough so that their trousers showed, their bangs in their eyes and long braids dangling down their backs, were standing about, nudging each other and pointing, giggling, and gawking.

The column from Pilgrim disappeared through a red doorway which faced the small open tract. Instantly for them the scene changed to another of equal bustle and jollity. The Chou courtyard looked like an outdoor restaurant. In the center were six or seven square dining tables, each with its four backless benches. On one side of the yard were longer tables where several young women were fast adding to the hundreds of dumplings lined up in neat rows in shallow reed baskets or on the big round, woven-reed covers of tubs or kettles. For this special occasion everything of the kind that the family owned had been collected to hold dumplings. On three sides of the court were the rooms occupied by the family, built of gray brick with tiled roofs, all of them in strikingly good repair. Through a gate could be seen another yard full of farm implements and piles of cornstalks and roots for fuel. The rooms surrounding the farther yard were evidently storehouses for grain.

The students paused for a minute immediately inside the gate while Curly's mother came bustling out to welcome them. With her were the children and the dog which the girls had seen from afar. Mrs. Chou was a neat, jolly-looking woman of thirty-five or thereabouts. Shu-lan decided at once that she must be a clever housewife and pleas-

ant neighbor. She insisted heartily that the girls should at once sit down at the tables to drink tea and eat "some small odds and ends." They all assured her that they were not a bit hungry, but eventually sat down as she directed and enjoyed piping-hot tea and piles of crullers and sesame-covered cakes. She declared hospitably that it would never do for them to try to put on a play when they were hungry!

When the greediest were ashamed to eat any more and they were waiting to see what would happen next, Mr. Li appeared at the gate.

"Well! I see you're all here. Good!" he greeted Shu-lan. "You know there are exhibits in the temple court. I thought the girls could give them a look and then dress for the play. By that time it ought to be about one o'clock when the crowd of women will be largest. How does such a schedule strike you?"

"It's better than anything we'd thought of because we didn't know we'd have a chance to see anything. We were planning only on being seen," Shu-lan answered.

"You've already begun to do that creditably. Well, I'll be somewhere conveniently near and when you're ready you can let me know," and he disappeared.

Shu-lan announced the order of events, reminded the girls not to call attention to themselves by being boisterous, and turned them loose to visit the exhibits. They went by twos and threes and she followed, finding as she passed through the crowd outside that Monkey and Manager had attached themselves to her.

Just as the three were about to enter the temple court, they turned and looked back. The crowd was noticeably larger than it had been a half hour earlier. On the stage a white-uniformed nurse was using a large American doll to demonstrate how to bathe a baby while a young man read through a megaphone the lecture which explained the process.

"How'll we ever make them hear?" Manager worried.

"I'm afraid a good many of them won't hear," Shu-lan answered. "Remember, they aren't used to listening quietly. We'll just have to do our best."

"But look!" observed Monkey, "the ones in front listen." It was true that nearer the platform both men and women were watching and listening with great interest, and everywhere in the crowd people paid occasional attention.

Within the temple enclosure they found what Shu-lan had seen several times before at other places: exhibits by the Rural Service Center to illustrate methods of enriching rural life. Seeing them with Monkey and Manager was going to be a fresh experience, so she allowed the girls to set the pace. Men from the center were scattered through the courtyards explaining the exhibits and answering questions as the populace streamed by. They followed roped-off alleyways, free to stop wherever their attention was arrested.

In the first alcove a young man was using pictures and charts to give instruction about tuberculosis. The two girls saw at one glance that it was a subject they had no interest in. They did not hesitate an instant, but went on to the next exhibit. But as she passed, Shu-lan noticed the audience. Most of them were intelligent-looking young farmers. Elsewhere information was being given which would help them to make money faster. Yet they chose this subject and stood listening intently. Shu-lan pitied them. Undoubtedly many had a wife or sister or child at home stricken with this disease. She thought of Fifth Brother, working long hours in a rug factory. She hoped a little fearfully that tuberculosis should not turn out to be the reason why he was so pale and thin.

The three soon came to the poultry exhibits. One was a

vivid portrayal of the difference between poor and well-bred chickens. In a cage was a native nondescript hen and by her in a compartment a pile of eighty-seven eggs, equivalent to the average number such a hen laid in a year. In another cage was a white Leghorn hen of imported stock, and in a compartment by her the equivalent of her output. There were two hundred seventy-nine eggs and each of them almost twice as big as those of the other bird. The girls were fascinated. So many and such big eggs! Posters stated the facts, but because so many of the villagers were unable to read, young men from the center took turns giving an explanation of the exhibit. When one was tired another took up the task. Not only Manager and Monkey stood and gazed in amazement. The practical Chinese farmers looked and questioned. If it was true, how much better to have the white hen, they said, since after all, she would probably eat only a little more than the other.

Shu-lan's two guides soon discovered that near by were baby chicks. The place was surrounded by children. They were not concerned by the fact that the chicks were there only to demonstrate the pattern of a homemade brooder which the local farmers were being urged to copy. When their teacher discovered that her two companions were not able to leave this captivating place, she went on by herself and made a quick circuit of the other exhibits.

Here the bee specialist was talking about how to keep bees. In another yard the twelve members of the class taking the one-year course of apprenticeship offered at the center were all busy. Some were explaining the improved varieties of millet, corn, and kaoliang seed which, after years of careful selection, were for sale at the center. Others demonstrated an improved plow and other farm implements. Some illustrated and explained techniques for destroying plant diseases and insect pests. Everywhere the

confusion of voices was deafening, with people as closely crowded as if there were none at all in the village square outside the temple.

Near the exit Shu-lan found a few of her actresses and took them back with her to the Chou home. Since she had to do the making up herself this time, she wanted to begin early. It was such a short while since the previous performance of the play that the girls remembered all about their costumes and soon put them on with no other help than they could give each other. It was not long until everyone was accounted for. Those who were not preparing for the play were taking turns helping to make dumplings.

When the time came for their part on the program, Shu-lan, as before, was the only one who was nervous. From the temple entrance it had appeared that a great part of the crowd was paying no attention to what was happening on the stage. Yet when Shu-lan looked out from the wings all she saw were hundreds of interested upturned faces. With so many near at hand, quiet and attentive, the girls were not distracted nor worried by the movement and noise around the edge of the crowd. As time went on, she could see with relief that they were doing well and winning the approval of the audience.

The play successfully over, they all returned to the Chou courtyard. There they found that the boys had consumed half a dozen baskets of the neat rows of dumplings. But Mrs. Chou and her assistants were waiting for Curly's friends, ready to begin boiling the hundreds of dumplings still lying on the wicker trays. Now most of the girls sat down, two at each side of the square tables. As soon as the players had changed from their costumes to their uniforms they also took their places. Curly and her sister-in-law ran back and forth bringing platters heaped full of the steaming morsels, and urging every girl to eat more.

By the time the late-comers had arrived those who had

been served first were satisfied. Contentment shone from the faces of even the most stolid. There was no conversation at the table except when they had to wait for a fresh supply. For all they knew, the whole world obeyed the teaching of Confucius not to talk while eating. Over all the other noises outside the yard they could hear the blatant sound of a loud-speaker, operated with current ground out by a hand generator, broadcasting victrola records from the stage in the square. Now that the formal program was over several Pilgrim boys continued the entertainment by furnishing music. Those in the crowd who had no urgent duties would sit and enjoy it as long as the boys would play. They seldom had an opportunity to hear anything of the kind.

Meanwhile the teachers were beginning to congregate. First Miss Liu the nurse came out of the house and joined Shu-lan in one corner of the courtyard. She was an old Pilgrim graduate who therefore took more than a merely professional interest in present-day students. She and Shu-lan discussed school health problems until they were joined by Miss Chang of the Rural Service Center staff.

She came in from the crowd outside and sat down without ceremony. "My throat's worn-out and my feet ache, but hasn't it been wonderful! First of all, the weather! Supposing we'd had a dust storm today!" Her comments were a series of breathless exclamations. "And the big crowd! I wonder how many hundred there are. And so many women too! One doesn't mind getting tired when one can actually see people in the process of soaking up new life and ideas."

To Shu-lan the day had meant work, pleasant because the girls had been so thrilled with the outing, but definitely work. Only occasionally had she forgotten herself in other people's problems. "I must be very childish or selfish," she thought contritely. Miss Chang plainly felt sympathy and

kindly concern for all the hundreds of strangers she had seen during the day. "Now that I'm not going to get married and be shut up in somebody's kitchen, I must learn how I can be of some help to village women," Shu-lan thought to herself. She knew what their lives were like. She had only to think of her own home at Lucky Inn Village. While she was musing Miss Liu and Miss Chang were chatting over the happenings of the day. The fifth graders had all eaten. Lured by the sounds, they secured Shu-lan's permission to join the crowd outside.

The men guests all came together, ushered in by Mr. Chou who had gone to summon them. Shu-lan knew them all slightly: Mr. Yang, Mr. Wang and Mr. Liu from the Center and Mr. Li from the boys' school. Several of the staff were obliged to miss the dinner because they were busy with the exhibits in the temple courts. The three women sat at two sides of the table and the four men at the other two. The meal began in an atmosphere that had a certain degree of stiffness. Shu-lan, seated between Miss Liu and Miss Chang, was pleasurably excited by the unfamiliar prospect of eating at the same table with men. She was the youngest of the party. Mr. Wang, who was unmarried, and Mr. Li were nearest her in age, perhaps four or five years older than she. Mr. Liu had several small children, and Mr. Yang a daughter in the Pilgrim primary grades. He, being the oldest, was the one Mr. Chou selected to act in his place, to urge the other guests to eat more than they really wanted, as a hospitable host ought to do. They tried to persuade Mr. Chou to sit at the table with them. He insisted that seven was exactly the right number, the vacant place being a convenience for those who served. When the first dishes came in, he excused himself and left the courtyard. As head of the village, he felt responsibility for the activities outside.

As one course followed another, the "few extra dishes"

Curly had mentioned turned out to be a hearty meal. They were all local fare but seasoned deliciously: bean curd in several forms, fish from the river, chicken, beef, pork, Chinese cabbage, candied yams, and egg dishes, all seasoned with sesame, ginger, anise, peppers, onion, or garlic, or more likely a tantalizing combination which was just right. The guests relished them all and complimented Mrs. Chou and her daughter-in-law on their cooking.

Before the first course was over, the stiffness of manner among the guests was gone. They talked while they waited for the next dish.

"What is the word from your brother?" Mr. Yang asked Shu-lan.

"They're working on it over at the boys' school." She looked at Mr. Li and hesitated as if asking him to answer.

He told them briefly the same facts he had reported to her and Miss Fu a few days earlier and then added: "Our middleman has promised an answer today or tomorrow. The bandits have kept moving farther away all the time." Then he said to Shu-lan, "I suspect this week has seemed long to you, hasn't it, Miss Chien?"

"Is it only a week?" she exclaimed. He could not know the other problem which had made those days so long for her. "The odd thing is that often Second Brother and I wouldn't see each other for several weeks at a stretch and we'd think nothing of it. It makes a great deal of difference knowing I can't see him."

The others agreed to that and then joined in telling her not to worry too much. But their words sounded like conventional expressions of sympathy spoken while their minds were already moving on to some other theme. How could they be so sure everything would turn out all right? Worried as she had been and still was, their casual assurance only served to depress her. She may have looked a little sad, for Mr. Li soon added sympathetically, "I'll let

you know right away when word comes."

The men on the Center staff who had planned the day at Yang Chuang were as elated as Miss Chang had been over the weather.

"It was the sunshine that brought the crowd," Mr. Liu said. "Who wants to stay in the house on such a day? Getting people here was more than half the battle. Once they've discovered what we're doing it's easy to become friends with them."

Shu-lan recalled Big Brother's enthusiasm. "Did you know that my oldest brother was in your winter school this year?" she asked.

"Why no, I don't know that I connected any of them with you," Mr. Yang replied. Then looking at Mr. Liu he said, "That would be the young Chien from out by New Bridge."

"He had a wonderful time," Shu-lan told them, "and wants to come every year. You see, when I hear you discussing the reaction of the crowd, I know what it's like from the other end."

They were immediately interested, asking her questions about Big Brother's plans for the use of what he had heard and listening attentively to her answers. Several times they were interrupted by the arrival of new dishes to which they then gave undivided attention. Between courses they continued to talk about village life and especially how best it could be improved.

Miss Liu, the nurse, said: "I often wonder how much good it does to try to teach them about bathing a baby. Some of the youngsters looked as though they would be the better for being thrown into the water clothes and all."

"It's nearly time to discard padded clothes for lighter ones," Miss Chang reminded her. "This is the time of year that children are dirtiest."

"Oh, I heard a woman in the crowd," Mr. Wang re-

ported. "She said, 'Of course that china doll won't be hurt by a bath in such cold weather, but I say it's still much too early in the season to bathe a real baby,' and the other woman agreed. Let's hope they remember the technique until bathing days get here." He laughed.

But Miss Liu sighed. "That's why I wonder whether it does any good."

"The fact that they haven't learned the lesson isn't a reason for not teaching it any more," Mr. Liu said quietly. "You can't always tell where it's making an impression."

"I don't know enough about the life of the people out in the villages," Miss Liu confessed. "I grew up in Tung-hsien. When I studied nursing in Peking, the city girls all made fun of me for being from the country and in their opinion hopelessly conservative. So I got to thinking I represented village life. Of course we've people from the country as patients in the hospital all the time, but they can't bring their home atmosphere with them. It's when I come out to a place like this that I can see they're still a century or two behind the times."

"No," said Mr. Wang, "not in everything. That's one of the most interesting phases of the problem — how quickly and willingly they take up some modern things, like flashlights and bicycles, for instance —"

"And cigarettes and matches," said Mr. Yang.

"Foreign tennis shoes and knitted woolen clothes to wear inside their padded garments too," Mr. Liu added.

"And there are tins of condensed milk in every small town that has any shops at all, and for all they don't use milk in their diet they know it's the best thing for sick babies," Miss Chang said.

Mr. Wang resumed his comments. "But look how stubbornly slow they are about some other things, like — well, like breaking off their nasty habit of spitting everywhere."

"And giving babies all kinds of queer things to eat."

"And their old-fashioned ideas of marriage. That's really a fundamental thing," Mr. Liu said. He turned to Shu-lan. "That play was to the point all right."

"One of the best features of our whole day was the entertainment, thanks to you two and the students," Mr. Wang said. He smiled as he made a motion of his head in the direction of the Chinese music which was continuing to squawk vigorously outside.

Mr. Li bowed slightly in acknowledgment of his thanks. "It's good for us schoolteachers to go out where the students come from. I'm from a Shantung farmer family but I've been away so long, first at school, and now working, that I've lost the flavor of it. I was thinking while Miss Chien was answering you so easily that I'd have been at a loss if you'd thrown such questions at me. But these villagers are our own people. I'm glad the boys and I have spent a day with them and if we've done them any good it's just so much gain."

"There's no question but that we appreciate your help a lot," Mr. Yang concluded as another dish arrived. It was a piece of pork cooked until it was so tender that it fell to pieces under their chopsticks. When they had eaten as much as they wanted of it, Miss Chang suddenly laughed.

"Did you see the old lady whose great-grandson carried her pickaback?" she asked.

"No!" "Where?" "You mean her grandson, don't you?" They all asked.

"No, he's really her great-grandson, a big strong farmer about thirty years old with a gang of children who of course are 'great-great' to her."

"One almost never hears of anyone so old!" one of the men said.

"She's ninety, and each generation is about twenty years younger than the one before it. So her son's around seventy, and her grandson's fifty — almost as old as most

people who die of 'old age'! They brought a chair for her from home and set her in the front row."

"I saw that old lady," Shu-lan agreed, "listening with all her might. Why did they have to carry her?"

"She's too old to walk," Miss Chang answered, "and besides, did you see her feet? I've hardly ever seen tinier bound feet in this part of the country. They aren't over four inches long. She's quite a local character, I hear. I talked to her several times. She hasn't any teeth so she's a little hard to understand. It seems she's always wondered that the Chous let their daughter go to Pilgrim so she paid particular attention to the schoolgirls."

Shu-lan sighed. "Don't all the old pay particular attention to the schoolgirls!"

"But she gave you a great compliment. She thought they had as nice a manner as the village girls!" Miss Chang told this with gusto and they all laughed.

At last the soup was served and the dinner was over. Mrs. Chou hovered around to be sure her guests were satisfied, and then received their thanks with beaming smiles. Shu-lan could not remember ever eating a meal she had enjoyed so much.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

ON SUNDAY MORNING, SHU-LAN SAT QUIETLY in church. Thinking of Second Brother, and the promise that today there might be news, she was reminded of Mr. Li. She had noticed that he was sitting with the choir. The reason became apparent when at the time of the offertory he played a violin solo, accompanied by Miss Kung at the organ. She recognized the simple familiar air without being able to give a name to it and in her mind aimless thoughts accompanied the music.

She had not known that Mr. Li played the violin, but of course she knew very little indeed about him. He must have learned in Peking. She had never had a chance to study instrumental music of any kind. At the Tunghsien schools the music teachers taught singing to each class only once or twice a week. They had no time to give individual instruction. Nor was it customary for girls to play Chinese orchestral instruments. Boys, however, often learned to perform on one or another of them: a flute, a two-stringed violin, a sheng or perhaps a moon guitar. They learned from each other or from some elderly teacher in the village. In Peking Shu-lan had often heard foreign violins, like this one Mr. Li was playing. She liked the familiar Chinese kind with all its associations of childhood but the softer tone of the foreign instrument had its own appeal too. It must be interesting to know how to play something. She watched Mr. Li's strong graceful fingers

while she listened to the familiar melody. She watched his face, too. She knew so little about men! How many were as nice as he? He seemed entirely different from the others she knew.

She had chosen a vacant seat in the same pew with Miss Pan. After the service was over they walked home together.

"I've hardly seen you for a week," Shu-lan chided her playfully.

"My little sister's been sick. I've been busy at home helping mother with the housework."

"I'm sorry. Is she better?"

"Oh, yes. She's all right. What've you been doing?"

There was the true answer: "Changing my whole life by purchasing freedom from an engagement to marry a certain young man named Wu." But that was not what Shu-lan said.

"Oh, worrying about my brother mostly, I guess. And yesterday I took the fifth grade to Yang Chuang to give our play at a fair."

"Was it fun?"

"Yes, it really was, much more than I expected."

"How'd they happen to know about you?"

"Mr. Li had to arrange a program and he asked us."

Miss Pan's eyes brightened with interest. "Say, aren't he and Miss Kung having a good time!"

"I don't know. Are they?" Shu-lan's tone showed that she had never thought of connecting them.

"Didn't you see them playing together there in church this morning? You don't suppose they could do it without practicing, do you? I hear he's over there all the time."

The Kung home was only a few doors away from Court Eleven, and was an establishment of several large courtyards which had been filled by a family of children, most of them now grown and living in Peking. Both parents were among the most faithful and respected of the local

Christians. The daughter who had played the organ was the youngest of the girls and the only one who was at home unmarried. She was three or four years older than Shu-lan and therefore a generation ahead of her in school. Shu-lan knew her only slightly but heard of her through Miss Shang and some of the other Pilgrim teachers who were her friends. There were several boys still at home attending the boys' school, and all the married sons and daughters came often from Peking, bringing their children with them. There was constant coming and going by people of all ages, as every member of the family seemed to have a multitude of friends.

"I know, but —" Shu-lan began to discount Miss Pan's remarks in view of what she knew of the Kung habits.

"Don't say 'but,'" Miss Pan interrupted. "'People don't throw hooks where there are no fish.' Maybe you think Miss Kung doesn't know what a good catch Mr. Li is."

"Is he?" Shu-lan remembered the conversation of the day before. "I heard him say he was a farmer's boy."

"Where do you keep yourself? And what do you think about?" Miss Pan retorted impatiently. "I declare sometimes you go around as if your thoughts were miles away!"

"Maybe I'm trying to do fifth-grade arithmetic in my head," Shu-lan said jokingly. She was glad Miss Pan had had no inkling of where her thoughts really were!

"Mr. Li's parents are not living and his uncle manages their land and sends him his share of the income. He doesn't have to work at all but he likes this athletic job."

"I don't blame him," was Shu-lan's only comment.

"Of course not. Neither does anyone else, but what I was saying was, that Miss Kung is plenty smart enough to see her chance."

"Since you evidently can see it as well as she does, why

don't you ask your mother to send a matchmaker around to talk to him?" Shu-lan said, still in fun.

"As if he'd ever consider me! 'The staghunter will not look at the hare.'" Miss Pan ended the subject, and flitted lightly to another. She was interested in everyone's doings.

They had come out through the city gate and turned west, attracted by the path along the moat. It was not the shortest way home, but the old willows which hung over the water on each side were invitingly green. Along the banks dampness had hurried the fresh new grass into growing taller and greener than elsewhere. Here too were violets. The two young teachers were like children in their delight over the early blossoms. Each girl found a dozen or more as they loitered along in the warm spring sun. It was restful to spend time with Miss Pan. Like the flowers of the field, she lived in and enjoyed the present and let the morrow take care of itself.

After dinner, Shu-lan's restlessness returned. For a week now she had waited for news of Second Brother. The suspense was less sharp than at first, but persistent. Ever since Mr. Li had given her the hope that an answer from the bandits was due, she had kept listening attentively for a sound at the gate. The fifth-grade girls played quietly. She need not give them a thought. She dawdled in futile little tasks, waiting. When knocking finally proclaimed a caller, she was ready and ran to the gate herself.

Mr. Hu, the husband of her former teacher, stood outside. He was one of the younger members of the boys'-school faculty. Shu-lan was embarrassed that she could not ask him in. Her father had come into her room — her brother into the yard — but she would have to take Mr. Hu to the school reception room. She blushed faintly and started to stammer an apology. To her surprise he interrupted her.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Chien, but I only want to say a few words and I wonder if you'd mind standing here at the gate a minute."

"News of my brother?" Shu-lan guessed eagerly.

"Yes, we have word from Liu Kuei-tang. Everyone over at school agrees that the handwriting is your brother's. You know he has quite a reputation for his beautiful Chinese penmanship. The teachers all declare that he wrote this letter."

"Well, what does it say?"

"Liu asks the school to send someone to negotiate in person about the boys. The principal has asked Mr. Li to go — his schedule is easy to arrange and he has a way with people. He's leaving on this next train for Shun Teh and hadn't time to come himself, so he sent me. He said he'd promised to tell you right away whatever the school found out about the boys."

"Shun Teh! From Peking it'll take him all day long on the train to reach there! And what about money for their ransom?" Shu-lan was painfully conscious of how empty her hands were at the very moment when her father had said she must be ready.

"The message doesn't say how much it will be. Mr. Li will try his best to talk them down, but the important thing is to get the boys back, regardless."

"Then maybe he won't be able to free them this time, but just learn how much the ransom is, and have to go again to pay it. Is that right?" Shu-lan asked.

"Perhaps," Mr. Hu said. "We can't tell."

"I hope the bandits don't like Mr. Li so well they keep him too!"

"I guess there's no danger of that," Mr. Hu answered laughing. "Well, be as patient as you can. It may take a week or two."

"Thank you for bringing the word," Shu-lan replied.

"I'll send it on to my parents. There's always someone coming in to the Rural Service Center or going out from there to the experimental farm near New Bridge. We can send word home almost any day and our folks have been keeping up with news of Second Brother that way." Then after Mr. Hu had started she called after him, "Please tell Mrs. Hu I'm coming to see her some day soon." Now she really would go.

After Mr. Li's departure to arrange for the release of the boys, Shu-lan seemed to wake out of a dream. Instead of the constant thought that the news might come any minute, she could feel sure that there would be no word for some days. The children's problems became clear and important again and for the first time in several weeks instead of going to her room after school, she wandered into the office looking for companionship.

"Well, look who's here!" Miss Han, the fourth-grade teacher exclaimed. Two or three others echoed the comment.

"How'd you happen to drop around?" Miss Tien, the sixth-grade teacher asked. "We thought you'd got tired of us all."

Shu-lan had no answer. She could not explain to these girls about the broken engagement. For the moment she could not think of anything else.

Miss Fu spoke for her. "She's had her brother to worry about and I guess if you'd been putting on a play and then repeating it you'd have been busy too." Then she jerked her chin toward Miss Tien and laughed. "It'll be somebody else's turn next time."

At that Miss Tien groaned. "Oh, my! I hope nobody wants a play for a long while then."

Someone changed the subject. "I hear Mr. Li's gone after your brother and Johnnie Lin."

"I wonder how long it'll take him."

"Mr. Li's a pretty good one to send. He won't get scared and rattled."

"Think of seeing and talking to Liu Kuei-tang!"

"The boys'll have quite a story."

Comments came fast. The teachers were perched all over the room drinking tea. Shu-lan sat on a stool and sipped hers. She never had much to say in the faculty group but she liked to listen to the others. They jumped from one topic to another easily and carelessly, laughing often when they thought they had made a good point, sure of each other's understanding.

Suddenly into Shu-lan's mind came the exultant thought: "I don't have to leave these girls! I don't have to get married! I can teach here as long as I like!" She put her cup on the table and stretched her arms as wide as she could. She had to make room in her body for all the joy she felt.

Immediately she remembered that all her problems were not yet solved. But the moment had been a hint of how happy she was going to be. When Second Brother had returned safely, and her parents had recovered from their anger, and the church had decided not to drop her name, and she had finally paid all the money she owed — she would teach school and buy pretty new clothes and enjoy herself! She glimpsed the happy years ahead. She looked at Miss Fu, laughing and chatting with the other teachers, efficient, self-confident, and loved by everyone. Perhaps some day she could be like that.

It was nearly the end of March, but by the Chinese calendar, the twentieth of the second moon. How long Shu-lan had thought of that date with dread! It was the one on which her mother had promised the Wus that her only daughter, Shu-lan, should be dressed in red satin and carried out the gate in a gold-embroidered red sedan chair to

begin her career as bride of young Wu and daughter-in-law to her mother's old friend. The twentieth day was on Friday. The spring sun shone its warmest, urging the grass and trees to greater efforts and richer beauty.

Shu-lan was not worrying that she had heard no more from Carter Sung. For today it was sufficient to feel sure that no empty sedan chair of red or any other color was being carried to the Chien home in Lucky Inn Village to fetch the daughter of the house. But when Pockmark called her and said, "That fat man's come to see you again," she was glad. She and the middleman greeted each other almost as friends and he was soon giving her news of her home village.

"They aren't through talking about you," Carter Sung reported, "but yesterday the Tuan family had a big fight and afterward their third daughter-in-law jumped into the well."

"Oh, dear! Didn't it kill her?" Shu-lan asked aghast.

"Of course it did. So now the brothers from her mother's home have come posthaste and there's going to be a big row. Everyone knows a lot about how the Tuans have treated that girl. The two older daughters-in-law ganged up against her and the old lady —"

"It's too bad!" Shu-lan interrupted the flow of gossip. She did not care to hear about the Tuans. She preferred word of her own people. "What about my father and mother? Are they well? And all the family?" Sugarball and Lotus Bud would be growing so fast!

"I haven't seen them myself for two or three days. Yes, they're all right. I'm sorry to say your mother reviles you every time your name's mentioned. She says she'll never own you again so I guess you'd better not go home just yet. She'll get over it after a while."

Shu-lan hung her head. "I'm afraid it's been hard for them."

"She'll miss being friends with Mrs. Wu. But Mrs. Wang, next door to you, already takes the vacant place at mah-jongg. Now all your mother's talk is about Second Brother. She surely takes it hard — losing her best son. You should hear her praise him! She says he's the only child of all the ten she bore that ever showed much promise and that's why she planned he should go to the university. And now bandits have carried him off and she has little hope of ever seeing him again."

"But you must take back word that she's not going to lose him. He's reported well and a teacher from the boys' school, Mr. Li, has gone to arrange for his release. Don't let mother worry too much about him. Some way I've a lot of faith in Mr. Li."

"Your father talked that way to her, but she says that until she sees her favorite son with her own eyes she won't believe he's safe."

"And my father?"

"Well, what he's taking hardest is your being put out of the church. That's in this second letter Mr. Wu gave me —" He took from a pocket a black packet which he unfolded on the table. Inside a square of thin silk he disclosed two envelopes both addressed to "Miss Chien Shu-lan." Meanwhile he continued to talk. "You probably understand the ins and outs of these Christians. It seems they don't treat your father the way they did and it hurts. But he goes over there to the New Bridge church every Sunday regardless, and since this business began Big Brother always goes along too."

He started to give the letters to Shu-lan and then said, "How'd it be for you to ask that other teacher to help you look these over — the one who came in the last time."

As she ran to look for Miss Fu, Shu-lan turned over in her mind the last bit of news Carter Sung had given her. She was relieved to know that her trouble had not turned

Big Brother from the church. Fortunately Miss Fu was free to come, and the two teachers studied together the official-looking document from the Wus, formally terminating the engagement.

"It looks all right," Miss Fu decided. "These are their seals, aren't they?"

"Yes, there's no mistake. This is mine, and these are those of the headman of our village and Miss Chien's father and older brother and these are the witnesses—everyone's there."

"You truly spent your heart," Shu-lan said politely, feeling how inadequate the ready-made phrase was to express her gratitude.

"What's this?" Miss Fu picked up the other envelope.

"It's from the church," Shu-lan replied, "let's read it." If it had come by way of Mr. Wu, it was bad news, but putting off reading it would not make it any easier.

Miss Fu opened the big sheet of paper on which in carelessly written characters were stated the facts that Chien Shu-lan had for five years been a member of the New Bridge church but that her name was being removed from the church roll, her misconduct being: disobedience to her parents, breaking a solemn promise, and insubordination to the discipline of older members.

"How dare they!" Miss Fu exclaimed to Mr. Sung, her dark eyes snapping with anger. "Why, the idea!"

"I don't belong to it!" he said hastily, avoiding responsibility, "I'm no Christian!"

"Looks to me as if some other people weren't either," Miss Fu retorted. "They can't do that!"

"Apparently they can," Shu-lan answered sadly.

On Mr. Sung's face was a hint of amusement. Here was material for gossip. The Christians were going to have a quarrel too.

"I'll take this," Miss Fu said, keeping the church letter

and handing Shu-lan the other. "And you hang on to that one."

Shu-lan agreed absent-mindedly. She was curious about one more thing. "Has Mrs. Wu found a daughter-in-law yet?" she asked the carter.

"There are negotiations," Mr. Sung answered, grinning. "There's plenty of time. Her daughter's wedding is still a month off."

"To be sure," Shu-lan answered, "the wedding day the astrologer would choose from some other girl's horoscope wouldn't be the same as mine. This was my 'lucky day.'"

"Well, isn't it?" Miss Fu said laughing. "Look what you have in your hand."

As he left, Shu-lan gave Mr. Sung all the latest details she knew about Second Brother's affairs knowing that he would broadcast them far and wide. "It won't be long till he's here himself, I hope. Mr. Li's been gone since Sunday. He'll surely come soon."

Shu-lan wished she could celebrate. Never would there be another day so wonderful and never could anybody spend one in a more prosaic way than she was spending this one. The fifth grade had not thought of doing anything entertaining for nearly a week. They could hardly smile. Six weeks' tests were due and the girls were more serious and fearful than college students cramming for semester finals.

Tunghsien offered no ready-made entertainments. There were no moving pictures. Shu-lan, while a student in Peking, had experienced the thrill of seeing them three times, urged by her teachers to spend the money because they thought it was "part of her education." She would never forget what she had seen: one of a young woman skating, another with a little girl called Shirley Temple in it, a third of an attractive girl with a wonderful voice and

a lot of men who played foreign musical instruments. If there were only something like that to go to see today!

Respectable young women were not supposed to visit a teahouse or restaurant for a social hour. Shu-lan could not think of any suitable amusement, but only a hint was enough for Miss Fu. She immediately comprehended what Shu-lan needed and had an idea how to accomplish it.

"Yes, come on, let's walk into the city and see what's in the shops." The stores were fully two miles from the school and Shu-lan had never gone to them more than a time or two during a term. It would be a real outing.

Once the proposal was made, the party soon became an expedition. Miss Shang could not go. She was busy with afterschool athletics. But four or five other teachers suddenly remembered things they needed to buy, and Miss Fu had promised two high-school girls that they could go with her the next time she went to the main street. Shu-lan had no money to spend, and spent none, but she gave advice to the others, helping them choose soap or cloth or letter paper, and so enjoyed the fun of shopping. By the time they had all walked to the shops and back it was supertime. Extremely simple as the pleasure had been, it was sufficient in that it furnished excitement of doing something different from other days.

Shu-lan left the others at the main gate of the school and hurried on alone toward Court Eleven. She caught up with Miss Kung just as they reached her home.

"Won't you come in a little while?" she invited Shu-lan graciously. Miss Kung had pretty clothes and wore them with style but her face was not particularly good-looking. Shu-lan was surprised that she had never noticed that fact before.

"I'm afraid I can't now, thank you," Shu-lan answered, "I must be back at the dormitory before supper."

"I suppose so," Miss Kung agreed, "but drop in some

day when you have the time," she added hospitably.

Miss Kung was all right, of course, but if she could not play the organ or piano, would Mr. Li care so much for her? Shu-lan wondered.

She wondered about another thing. It was natural whenever she thought of Second Brother to wish that he would come, and to see his sensitive young face. But why was it that just as likely it was Mr. Li's face she saw? Sometimes he was laughing but more often serious, as she had more often seen him. Occasionally in her memory she saw him so clearly that she noticed again the little brown mole on his left cheek.

After school a few days later, Shu-lan could hear from her room what sounded like singing practice interspersed with shrieks of laughter from somewhere in the dormitory. The singing was very uneven. She had never heard her girls do so badly. What could be the matter with them? They were singing a song Shu-lan seemed to remember as one of those their music teacher from Peking had recently taught them. They had always sung it pleasingly enough. What was the matter now? The laughter meant they were having fun doing it, anyway.

After hearing it a while she became so curious she left her desk and walked toward the sound. Now the girls were singing, "All the Birds Have Come Again." One voice was very loud, off the key, and about two words behind the others. When they finished, again they roared with laughter. They chose another song. It was certainly Monkey who called out: "I'll sing it! I'll sing it!" As before, two or three words behind the others lagged one voice shouting off key.

In the middle of a phrase there was a sudden silence. Someone had caught sight of the teacher, probably through a peephole in the paper window. Still curious, Shu-lan

went to the room. On entering she found three times as many students as belonged there. Every head was bent over a book and every girl so intent on her study she had to be roused as from sleep.

"Were you practicing something special?" Shu-lan asked.

"No, Miss Chien," Monkey murmured demurely. Shu-lan could have sworn she had been the last singer. All right, they could tell or not as they chose. Of one thing she could be certain: For some reason they considered their performance something to be ashamed of.

"It isn't studytime," Shu-lan said sweetly, "you needn't work so hard."

"We want to," someone answered just as sweetly.

Shu-lan turned and went back to her room as mystified as ever. What had they been up to?

More than a week of perfect spring days passed, filled with innumerable small duties. All the pudgy children of winter were now slender. They moved gracefully again without the handicap of padded clothes, and lightly too, now that what they called "cat's nests," their heavy padded shoes, had been discarded. These for the most part had been replaced by homemade cloth ones although rubber-soled American-style tennis shoes were becoming more and more popular. It was nearly the middle of April. On the banks of the moat violets had made a blue carpet which was now beginning to fade, and the grass was lush and green. Every girl in the fifth grade had on her desk a small bottle. Its utilitarian purpose was to hold water for her ink stone. But since the day when there had been enough violets to go around, each morning the bottles had been full of fresh flowers—pale apricot blossoms, yellow forsythia, or golden dandelions, each in its turn. Now some were beginning to hold white and lavender lilacs or the

wild radish blossoms which grew in purple patches. The room was gay with color.

The breathlessness with which Shu-lan had at first watched for Second Brother had changed to a more quiet waiting. People in discussing the kidnaped boys remarked with surprise that Mr. Li's negotiations were taking longer than the time originally predicted, and then went on to say that such things never moved very fast. The bandits were sure to keep far away from railroads and big cities. Over and over new estimates were made as to how many days would be required and always they fell short of the actual number of those which passed. Shu-lan, ever conscious of the possible necessity for money to be used as bribes or ransom hoped that its lack was not the cause of the delay. Suppose — ! She supposed every contingency. In the end there was nothing to do but wait.

Meanwhile teaching was beginning to take on new zest and she began to think of it as her lifework and not merely a temporary means of earning a little money. One day she talked with the sixth-grade teacher, Miss Tien. They decided that they would confer occasionally on ways to make the coming transition to the next room easier for the fifth graders. Shu-lan looked with new interest at the fourth-year children, wondering what their names were. Next term they would be her girls. She tried a new method of explaining decimals, suggested in her teachers' manual, and found such satisfaction when it worked that she could see ahead a continuous prospect of such interesting improvement in technique. She had enjoyed teaching during the fall term when it had been a never-failing source of wonder that she, Shu-lan, was the Miss Chien whom forty girls obeyed. Now she began to take a more professional attitude.

How much more interesting Curly was, since her teacher knew her home and family! Always, from the first

day of school, Monkey and Manager, Skeeter and Baby, Auntie and Amah had been individuals. Shu-lan began to study the personalities of a few day pupils who still meant little to her. Their faces appeared only pensive or stolid or secretive or dull. She hoped some day to understand them, every one, and become to each the kind of friend Miss Fu was to the older girls. In spite of the ever-present feeling of anxiety which tinged her sense of waiting, the days were full and satisfying.



CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN SECOND BROTHER DID FINALLY RETURN it was without warning. Though Shu-lan had been disappointed so many times, that afternoon, as on all the other afternoons, when she heard the whistle of the approaching train, she waited and watched. Within fifteen minutes after alighting from the train he was striding into the yard at Court Eleven toward the door of his sister's room. She was standing in her doorway looking longingly out when he came to the gate, and with a cry of joy ran and met him halfway across the courtyard. Meanwhile squeals of delight from the dormitory rooms indicated that the girls had also recognized the caller and rejoiced with their teacher in his return. They came out and stood around the edges of the court, watching.

In the middle of the yard, Shu-lan, hands clasped and eyes sparkling, looked up at her browned brother. "You're really here!" she cried.

"Yes, here I am." He grinned back at her.

Shu-lan sighed. "How long I've waited!" Her eyes did not leave his face. "And I've been so afraid of what they'd do to you."

"So Mr. Li said — that you were worrying — but they didn't hurt us." He glanced around the courtyard and Shu-lan following his glance, noticed for the first time the girls all standing at a distance but obviously hoping to be invited to hear his report. They had been from the first so

excited about the adventure of their teacher's brother that their restrained conduct now showed admirable self-control.

Shu-lan beckoned to them to come closer. Ordinarily she would not expect them to talk to Pilgrim boys. Here, however, Shu-lan could see that there was no likelihood that their listening to Second Brother would lead to any clandestine friendship such as the school rules forbade. Second Brother looked upon her pupils as mere children and though at nineteen he was only four years older than the oldest of them, because he was nearly through senior middle school and they were only fifth graders, they naturally thought of him as a grownup.

Near by were a few small stools someone had carried out of the dormitory rooms. "Come on," she said to her brother, "we'll sit down. I want to hear all about everything that's happened."

"Where shall I begin?" Second Brother asked. The girls had crowded around them. Among the eager faces Wang Ma's was as bright as any.

"Begin where the bandits took you away," Shu-lan replied. "Sometime I want to hear about your applying at the university, but that can wait."

"It almost can't," her brother said. "The special entrance examinations are next week. Johnnie Lin and I would've been pretty sick if we'd missed them. It's bad enough not to have more time to cram."

"But tell me about the bandits catching you."

"Well, it was a lovely day and we three boys were pleased with ourselves, pedaling along almost halfway home. We saw some men ahead, but didn't think anything of it. Most of the bandits were out of sight behind the scrubby willow trees that grow along the track behind the walls of that little village just the other side of Twin Bridges, close to the railroad. All of a sudden Johnnie and

I found ourselves surrounded by a rough crowd and there was no sign of Tom Li."

"Weren't you worried about him?"

"No, when later we'd had time to talk it over we figured he'd got away and would carry you folks word. So losing him was good luck but losing our bicycles wasn't. The bandits took them away from us, of course. We had to walk. They moved right along mile after mile, and we weren't used to that."

"Weren't you scared?" one of the girls asked breathlessly.

"We naturally didn't like having our hands tied behind us. You feel so helpless! Then Johnnie and I had the bright idea that we could talk English and they wouldn't understand. It worked too. The next thing we knew, they were saying, 'students,' and then after a while when they spoke to us they weren't so gruff."

"Did you ever see Liu Kuei-tang himself?" one of the girls whispered, her eyes big.

"That was the next thing. His men must have reported about us, because he called us in to write for him."

"Weren't you afraid of him?"

"We were at first! He'd shoot anybody who made him mad. But we got to be regular pals of his. You see he needed letters written, and he liked the way we wrote them for him."

"When he found out how good you were, it's a wonder he'd let such secretaries go," Shu-lan suggested.

"That's just what he objected to! We didn't have to be much good to be better than anybody he could get," Second Brother said modestly. "Mr. Li was mighty clever about it. You see Liu wants to be a general in the regular army so Mr. Li treated him all the time as if he was one and of course the old fraud was flattered. Mr. Li told him it would hurt his reputation — as if his reputation could

be hurt any more — if it became known that he had kept such promising young men from their studies.” Second Brother laughed heartily. Everything was a cause for laughter today. “I will say this for Liu,” he added, “he’s not fallen too low to appreciate and respect learning. That’s how Mr. Li made his argument work. Even so Liu held off three days before he was finally talked down.”

“But before Mr. Li got there,” Shu-lan asked, remembering her days of anxiety, “had they treated you well all the time? Didn’t they beat you or starve you or anything?”

“It’s too bad!” Second Brother answered, his eyes twinkling, “I’m afraid we haven’t much of a story! We were never hungry and they didn’t beat us once.” Then his face was suddenly sad. “But, oh, the things they did to other people!” He sat silent, his eyes on the ground, and the girls stood motionless, guessing from their general knowledge of bandits a little of what he meant. “You see at the start we were always with them when they were looting and robbing.”

“Did you see them kill people?” several girls asked in horror.

“The things they did weren’t nice. I wish I could forget them. I certainly have no excuse for telling them to you and making you unhappy. But lately we’ve been just staying in the same place up in the hills and it’s been less harrowing because we boys didn’t have to see so much. Of course our being in such an out-of-the-way place was one reason why it took so long for Mr. Li, going and coming. As I told you, he treated old Liu like a general, and so was treated in turn like a general’s guest.”

“What did they do for him?”

The expression on Second Brother’s face showed that the memory was amusing. “You should have seen it! Feasts, and a bodyguard of twenty ruffians tagging around after him! Mr. Li carried it off all right.”

“ And Liu let you go without being paid any money! ” Shu-lan exclaimed.

“ Oh, we were little fishes in his net. He went from one town to the next right across the country and took everything he wanted. We couldn't have paid enough for him to notice the difference. I hope father didn't worry trying to raise money. Mr. Li said he thought you had it on your mind — ” He looked at his sister as if he would have asked something but could not on account of his audience. Then he stood up as he said: “ Well, I must be going. It'll soon be supertime and I have to see if there's anybody at the Rural Service Center who's going out our way tomorrow and can take news to the folks. I haven't time to go before exams, not even for one day.”

Shu-lan went with him to the gate. As soon as they were out of hearing of the girls, he asked eagerly: “ What about your engagement? I quizzed Mr. Li for news of you but I couldn't get anything out of him except about how well you'd managed a play, and — ” he paused and grinned, “ and how pretty you are.”

“ He didn't say so! ” she exclaimed, too hurriedly, she at once realized. How could she help blushing with Second Brother standing there watching her and chuckling? Where had he learned to be such a tease? She hastened to answer his question. “ The engagement's broken! Everything's finished. When you have more time I'll show you the document I have from the Wus.” She was again confident and happy.

“ You're a clever girl! ” Second Brother praised her.

Someday she would tell him all about how difficult it had been to decide what to do. For the present, it was enough that he was safely back again.

The Monday after Second Brother returned, Big Brother called. For a moment, when Shu-lan first saw him, she was startled. Then she guessed his errand and wel-

comed him heartily. She was coming to like her brothers better all the time.

"Did you come in to see Second Brother?" she asked. "Otherwise I should think a farmer would be too busy for a trip to town."

"You're right," he answered. "It's such a busy time that I came on a wheel and I'm going right back home again, but our parents can hardly contain their joy that Second Brother is safe. I came partly to see him and partly to plan for our thanks to Mr. Li."

"Of course!" Shu-lan replied. "I didn't think of that. We must buy him a present."

"No, father says we'll give him a feast."

"Fine! That's a better idea," Shu-lan agreed. "It'll be a wonder if Johnnie Lin's father doesn't want to go in on it."

"It seems he lives in Shanghai. He's too far away. We'll just do it ourselves."

"Where'll you have it? And when?"

"It's all arranged for a week from Saturday at the Rural Service Center. We'll have the food sent from that good restaurant near the post office. They'll send men to serve it in the Center dining room. Then our guests won't have to walk all that long way over into the city."

"That'll be nice. And while father's in, you can show him the seeds and chickens and such things at the Rural Service Center."

"Oh, mother's coming too," Big Brother replied. "It's all she can do to wait. She's forgotten she was ever displeased with Second Brother for not wanting to get married."

"Has she forgotten she's displeased with me about the same thing?" Shu-lan asked dolefully. She wished the answer would not be what she knew it must.

"Well, she doesn't have it on her mind as heavily as she

did. There's that much hope that she'll eventually get over it." Big Brother nodded his head a few times and made a wry face at the reminiscence. "The village had a big time talking about you for a while. They've about stopped now."

"Mr. Sung told me the Tuans had furnished a newer scandal."

"That's not the only reason. I suppose some of the old women who never get out of the village will always think you did something terribly disgraceful. But the younger men, when they mention young Wu say, 'The Chien girl's lucky to be free!' I don't know that they have any proof, but people keep up the talk about his heroin business."

Shu-lan asked after Sister-in-law and the two little girls and sent them her love, but did not detain Big Brother more than a few minutes. Twenty-five miles was a long ride to take before dark.

Mrs. Hu lived in one of the faculty residential courts belonging to the boys' school. Set in the gray brick wall was a bright red gate trimmed with well-polished brass. Just inside it was a "spirit screen," a plastered brick wall eight or ten feet wide and about six feet high. In this place it had lost its traditional function of preventing the entrance of evil spirits, but when the gate was open it served to protect the enclosed yard from the curious gaze of passers-by.

Across the north side of the courtyard, its windows catching the warm spring sunshine, was a gray brick house. According to common Chinese practice, its five rooms were all built in a row with the entrance in the center of the middle one. On the east and west sides of the court were three-room buildings, that on the west evidently used for living room and bedrooms, and the one on the east for storerooms and kitchens. All was neat and tidy, the brick

paved walks in front of the house swept clean and the small patches of earth as bare as the bricks. Inside the gate at the left were thick lilac bushes just ready to bloom. Rising unhampered and symmetrical not far from the center was a great English walnut tree, its leaf buds now swollen to bursting.

On Saturday afternoon after Easter, having started the twenty-four residents of her dormitory on their schedule of baths, shampoos, laundry, cleaning and mending, Shu-lan made her long-promised visit to Mrs. Hu. In Shu-lan's student days at Pilgrim, she and this young teacher, then unmarried, had become good friends. There was about five years difference in their ages, and they continued the teacher-student relationship, but Mrs. Hu had always had an informal friendly manner toward her former pupil. Shu-lan knew that she would not need to get acquainted all over again, as she might with some people. Her eyes were bright with anticipation as she came through the courtyard.

The outside of Mrs. Hu's house was like any other Chinese residence. Inside, however, it might have been in a different country from the Chien homestead in Lucky Inn Village. The three central sections of the five-room building had been thrown together for a living room. The brick floor was covered with woven split-reed mats of creamy yellow. On them here and there were small sturdy cow-hair rugs in two shades of brown, modest copies of the rich, closely woven woolen ones made for Westerners in Peking rug factories. There was a study desk with bright covered books in English standing in a row on one end of it. All the glass panes in the paper windows had curtains of golden yellow cloth which could be pulled across the glass. There were four or five wicker chairs with cushions of the same yellow cloth. At the farther end of the room was a square Chinese dining table with a white cloth on it

and a brass bowl of lilacs in the middle. Shu-lan, unused to Western ways, was entranced. It looked like the magazine pictures she had sorted a few Sundays before.

"What a lovely room!" she exclaimed. "I haven't been here since you changed it. It looks like the pictures of an American home."

"That's where we got our ideas," Mrs. Hu responded.

"It's something like the rooms the foreign teachers have." Shu-lan had often sat in their big chairs. "Only they often have blue, and I think this yellow's prettier," she decided.

"The surprising thing is how handy and comfortable some of these American-styled things are," Mrs. Hu said. "It's a wonder we didn't think of them long ago. We keep buying things as often as we can, especially kitchen equipment. I'll show you all I have. I'm awfully proud of my kitchen," then in a pleased whisper she added, "and Mr. Hu's even prouder of it than I am!" She was leading the way to the nearest of the three rooms on the east side of the yard.

Shu-lan had never seen so clean a kitchen. One of the whitewashed walls was covered with shelves on which were neatly arranged all the things that in ordinary kitchens cluttered the table and floor. In Shu-lan's home her mother was satisfied that her floor was of brick instead of beaten earth like her neighbors'. Here it was of smooth cement and even the corners were empty and clean. The brick stove was as high as a table, built in a fashion similar to the big ones in the school kitchen. Shu-lan could see in a minute how much more convenient it was than the kind she knew—a big iron kettle sunk into a little mud platform about a foot high, under which the fuel must be constantly fed.

Apparently none of those things which so attracted Shu-lan's attention was new enough to Mrs. Hu to be worth mentioning. She showed Shu-lan her small icebox, a quart

ice-cream freezer, her two aluminum kettles, and her newest purchase, a food chopper.

When they had finished the wonders of the kitchen, they settled down in two of the cushioned chairs. They had begun this visit as intimately as they had left off at the end of the last one more than three years before, and continued talking with easy comradeship.

The contrast between this house and Shu-lan's village home was no greater than that between Mrs. Hu and the young married women of Lucky Inn Village. She was dressed like a teacher in a long straight garment of tan-and-green flowered material. She looked slender but not frail. Her shiny black bobbed hair was drawn back from her face in the current fashion. She was not especially pretty but her expression was intelligent and animated. Most of all she differed from the young matrons of Lucky Inn in that she acted as though living was fun for her and she was ready to make everyone else enjoy it too.

Shu-lan had planned never again to tell anyone about her engagement. Afterward she could not remember how she started. Once begun, however, she could not stop, and the first thing she knew she was recounting to Mrs. Hu's sympathetic ears all the difficulties of the last three months. She could not altogether keep back the tears when she told how angry her parents still were, and how she had been put out of the church. The hurt was too recent and too deep to be mentioned with composure. But the story as a whole was one of problems successfully solved and best of all of a future bright with the promise of interesting work.

Happily married herself, Mrs. Hu ventured to challenge Shu-lan's plans a little.

"Schoolteaching's all right, but I hope you'll get married eventually," she counseled. "You mustn't let this experience spoil your whole life."

"Spoil it. It's freed my whole life," Shu-lan assured her.

"You've no idea how wonderful it is for the first time to plan to do what I myself wish and not what other people want. Besides, you surely ought to remember how much fun teaching is. I'm going to be like Miss Fu some day! "

Mrs. Hu smiled amiably. "All right! I don't blame you. Have a good time! " After a moment's silence she added: "This tale you've told helps explain one thing — how much older you seem. I noticed it right away. It's partly because you've been in charge of a big class of students for a few months. But I felt something more than that. I wondered what had made you grow up. I like you better this way." Her glance was affectionate. "You are much more of a friend and less of a pupil today."

Shu-lan was pleased because Mrs. Hu so plainly approved of her. "A year ago does seem a long way off. I ought to be grown-up though. I'll be twenty-one next month."

When they had discussed Second Brother's departure and return and his prospects of securing a scholarship at the university, Shu-lan was ashamed how all the conversation had been about her affairs and none about what Mrs. Hu had been doing. She tried to offer an apology. Mrs. Hu interrupted it.

"If you think I can compete in interest with a village girl who breaks her engagement, and a high-school boy who is kidnaped — My household couldn't ever get into the papers. We cook and eat and sleep and play with the baby — "

"The baby! " Shu-lan exclaimed, amazed. "What baby? "

"Oh, didn't you know Mr. Li's baby's here? I've had her ever since her mother went to the hospital." Mrs. Hu nodded her head toward the building on the west side of the court. "We and the Lis shared this residence. They had those three west rooms and a kitchen across the yard.

"When she died Mr. Li just shut them all up and he's lived entirely at school. The baby'll wake up from her nap any time now." She looked at a little clock but continued with the sewing in her hands.

Shu-lan remembered that she had seen both Mr. and Mrs. Hu at Mrs. Li's funeral. "You were a special friend of hers, weren't you?"

"Yes. Originally it was because our husbands had been together in school. Mr. Hu is older but they were room-mates and kept up the friendship. Later I loved her for her own sake. She was a clever woman but mostly one thought of her as jolly and lovable."

"I wish I'd known her," Shu-lan responded. She said it because she wished it a little, but more because it seemed to be a suitable reply. Then she murmured a suggestion that it was about time for her to go.

"Indeed you can't leave yet," Mrs. Hu answered. "It won't be long until Mr. Hu comes home and then we'll have tea and cakes. You must at least stay for that. I'd have served them earlier, only I was sure you could wait for Mr. Hu. You can, can't you?"

"I didn't expect to spend the whole afternoon. You may have other plans."

"Not a thing. Rest your heart about that. I often just play with the baby. Later in the afternoon, as soon as it's too dark for tennis, Mr. Li comes and romps with her until he has to go back to the school for supper. He never gets here early enough to drink tea with us. And besides, he wants to have all the time he can with Sunbeam."

"Is that the baby's name?"

"That's what her mother called her, and she really is one. Wait till you see her."

They talked of Pilgrim. Tormented as Shu-lan had been by anxiety and indecision, she became more and more conscious of Mrs. Hu's poise and calm sense of security. While

she chatted, Shu-lan wondered what its source was and envied her friend. She thought of herself as happy and contented, but certainly she had no happiness like Mrs. Hu's.

After a little, sounds in the room east of them proclaimed the fact that Sunbeam's nap was over. Mrs. Hu went into the room and soon returned with the baby.

"Oh, the darling!" Shu-lan could not help exclaiming when she saw her. "How old is she?"

"She's just past a year," Mrs. Hu answered, sitting down and giving the baby an American-style soda cracker.

Sunbeam was dimpled and pink-cheeked, her round black eyes mischievous and friendly. A wisp of hair had been braided into a wee pigtail to the right of the top of her head and gave the roguish effect of a tasseled cap worn crooked. Her short lined jacket and trousers were of bright pink cloth covered with little flowers. On her feet were red satin shoes made to look as much like tigers as possible.

"We're hoping for a baby ourselves in the early fall," Mrs. Hu confided, "but Sunbeam will always keep her own place in our hearts." She gave the child a quick squeeze, and the baby content with her cracker and still studying the stranger, cuddled against her comfortably.

"She's perfectly adorable," Shu-lan said, "and isn't she quiet!"

Mrs. Hu chuckled. "That's only while she takes a good look at you. She's always been well, and as good as anybody could ask, but is she lively! Now she likes to creep everywhere and put her fingers into everything but I won't let her play on the floor when she's all cleaned up to see her father. When we want to have tea we'll put her into her play pen in the other room. She likes that almost as well as the floor."

The baby attacked her cracker with gusto. Her elders talked of mutual acquaintances. Shu-lan hoped to hear something about Miss Kung, but she was too bashful to

ask a question and Mrs. Hu failed to mention that particular neighbor.

By the time Sunbeam had finished her cracker she had decided that Shu-lan could become a friend of hers, and began to play peekaboo, squealing and bouncing with pleasure.

"Who can talk with such a jumping jack around?" Mrs. Hu said. "Anyway, it's time to get tea. Mr. Hu will be here in a minute." She got up to take Sunbeam into the other room.

"Oh, let me hold her," Shu-lan begged. "I have two little nieces so perhaps I'll know how to entertain her."

Mrs. Hu promptly handed the baby over, brought her two or three little toys, and began to set the tea table.

"Sweet! Captivating!" Shu-lan kept thinking as she played with Sunbeam. How different children were from each other! She had loved Sugarball and Lotus Bud all their lives, but this baby! There was a spice and zest to her play which simple little Sugarball had never approached for a minute. Shu-lan was highly amused by Sunbeam's cunning poses and coy glances. How did a mother ever stop playing with such a cute baby long enough to do her housework? Then she remembered with pity that this baby had no mother. But with Mrs. Hu to take care of her she was luckier than most babies whose mothers were alive.

Sunbeam certainly was not quiet. The play grew livelier. The baby jumped up and down on her new friend's lap, laughing and chortling and shouting. Shu-lan laughed and shouted with her. She heard someone come in but, thinking it was Mr. Hu, she did not look up immediately. Sunbeam had chosen just that moment to grab both fists full of Shu-lan's hair. She had not yet disentangled herself when she was startled by a deep voice.

"So that's what you girls do when I'm not around! I wondered how my ladylike daughter was learning to be

such a tomboy!" Mr. Li laughed at his own joke.

"I—I never played with her before," Shu-lan stammered. She was so embarrassed that she took him literally and then realizing it was a joke, saw how stupid she was appearing. Besides, her hair was badly rumpled and she could not let go of Sunbeam long enough to smooth it. Mrs. Hu had hurried in from the kitchen. "Oh, good! This is once you can be here to tea! Mr. Hu is due any minute."

Sunbeam had gone almost crazy with delight when she saw her father. He ignored her a minute while he answered Mrs. Hu.

"I'm sorry I can't, but the reason I came so early was to take Sunbeam over to school to watch the tennis. Otherwise what's the use of a Saturday afternoon half holiday in the springtime?"

"She'll love it," Mrs. Hu agreed placidly. She gave the impression of not being easily excited over small matters. "If you're going to be in the sun she won't need a sweater." She departed again for the kitchen.

Sunbeam had continued to jump up and down on Shu-lan's lap and call loudly for her father's attention. Now as he came to take her, he smiled pleasantly at Shu-lan.

"I haven't had a chance to thank you for bringing home my brother," she shouted over the noise the baby was making, "but maybe I'd better try again when I haven't any competition. Anyway, I assure you I'm most grateful." She smiled back at him over Sunbeam's head and stood up still holding the baby.

"All right, Sunbeam, here we go!" he said as he reached for her.

In her eagerness she kicked so vigorously that she almost leaped right out of Shu-lan's arms. Her father grabbed and caught her, his hands covering Shu-lan's firmly on each side of the squirming little body.

It was only for an instant. All over her, Shu-lan felt a thrill that took her breath away and made her heart beat wildly. She hurriedly freed her hands. She was tempted to look at them. Never before had she experienced anything like it. It was wonderfully pleasant, but Mr. Li must never know that. He had not yet moved away. She felt her face getting red. Through her lashes she gave him a quick glance.

He was standing there holding Sunbeam, quiet and content now that she was in her father's strong arms, and he was looking down at the baby, on his face the slight embarrassment of having blundered unintentionally and of not being sure how his awkwardness would be taken.

Oh, how Shu-lan's face was burning! He could not help seeing her blushes. She was fearful he would suspect the shocking pleasure she had felt at the touch of his hands. If he should guess it, what would he think of her? She smoothed her hair with trembling fingers and tried to appear unconcerned.

With her eyes on the baby she said, "Good-by, Sunbeam." Her voice gave her away. She tried to steady it. "Have a good time!"

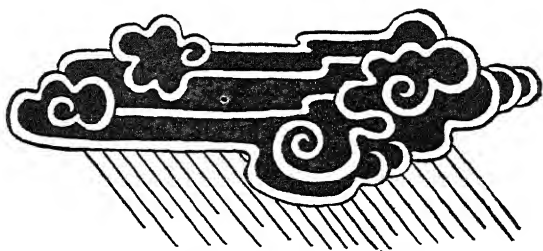
Mr. Li took a step or two toward the door. "Good-by, Miss Chien," he said, "we're glad to have seen you today." When she glanced at him, he was looking straight into her eyes with a look that she had never seen on any man's face before. There was friendly understanding in it, and a suggestion of startled happiness, perhaps, but there was something else she could not define.

Mr. Hu was arriving. The two men greeted each other informally. It was evident that Mr. Li came and went like a member of the household.

Tea was ready. Mrs. Hu's recent absence in the kitchen was explained. To go with their tea, in addition to small spongecakes which she had had on hand, she had made a

surprise — toasted slices of Chinese bread spread with salty peanut butter. Shu-lan drank the jasmine-scented tea and ate the tasty food as in a dream, remembering the tingling pleasure of Mr. Li's hands on hers, and the look in his eyes.

It was not until she was passing the Kung home on the way back to Court Eleven that she thought of Miss Pan's comment, "Aren't Mr. Li and Miss Kung having a good time!" Let them! She was sure it made no difference to her. She, Miss Chien, was not interested in men or their affairs. She was going to be a schoolteacher. Yet she was to wonder many times in the next few hours: What did Mr. Li mean by that look?



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IN THE CORRIDORS AT THE GIRLS' SCHOOL, big scrawly posters announced a track meet at the boys' field on Saturday, May eighteenth, only three weeks away. All the Tunghsien schools were to participate.

So on this Monday morning before any classwork could be done, the fifth graders felt it necessary to sign lists of entries and make a schedule of practice. The discussion sometimes became noisy while majority opinion persuaded some of the reluctant ones that duty to their school required them to compete. Usually they complained if their physical director suggested running races or jumping. They wanted only games in their play hour. Now for three weeks they would devote a large amount of extra time to learning techniques of track events, hoping to make a creditable showing against girls of the same grade in other schools.

Shu-lan explained that they ought not to wait until the posters appeared announcing the meet. They ought to practice more than three weeks in a year. She proved her point by calling attention to the Pilgrim boys' methods. Such admonitions were wasted. Her advice was too late for this year and would be forgotten before another spring. For the time being, the children were intent on races and jumping. In any free time there was sure to be somewhere a little group lined up with their toes behind a line on the ground, and the long skirts of their uniforms twisted

around their belts into a handful, while a classmate called, "One, two, three, go!"

Shu-lan remembered that today and tomorrow Second Brother had to be in Peking taking the early examinations for scholarship aid in the university. She had hoped that he would come to see her before he went. She could imagine how busy and excited he must have been ever since his return. Through the day she thought of him often and always with a little prayer for his success. Second Brother was closer to her than he had been before she had worried so much about him.

What did he mean by that look? Shu-lan was not thinking of Second Brother now! But this time it was afternoon and the fifth graders were busy writing their "big characters." Forty Chinese brushes were held perpendicular to the desks by forty graceful hands. Forty flexible wrists controlled the studied strokes and curves and dots. Forty black bobbed heads bent from straight blue backs to the exacting task.

"It was my own fault," Shu-lan told herself. "Everybody knows that it is not proper for a woman to hand a man anything. If I'd been giving him a teacup, I would certainly have put it on the table and he would have picked it up and all would have been correct." Over the busy bowed heads she smiled. One could hardly compare Sunbeam to a teacup. Yet the fact remained that in decorous Chinese deportment what she had done was not permissible nor should there have been such a memory as now distracted her attention during the writing lesson.

Shu-lan recollected her talk with Mrs. Hu about her engagement and was suddenly struck with consternation. "I forgot to make her promise not to tell!" She was impatient for the end of the day's lessons. She must immediately rectify this mistake. What if Mrs. Hu should tell her husband and he should tell at the boys' school the secret Shu-

lan had kept so carefully. As soon as the last class was dismissed she almost ran.

"Oh, Shu-lan, do come in!" Mrs. Hu welcomed her, "but I hope you won't mind sitting in the kitchen a few minutes. I'm in the middle of a job I can't leave very well."

To Shu-lan it did not matter where she sat when she got Mrs. Hu's promise to keep her secret, so long as she got it soon. Her hostess was busy mixing some batter. There was no need to be formal. Shu-lan spoke breathlessly.

"All of a sudden I remembered that I hadn't asked you not to repeat to anyone what I told you on Saturday about my broken engagement," she said anxiously.

"Why, certainly I won't tell, if you care," Mrs. Hu began slowly.

Shu-lan interrupted her. "Care! I'd die if they should hear of it over at the boys' school."

"I'm sorry. I can promise not to tell any more, but I've already told part of it to my husband and Mr. Li — that afternoon after you'd gone."

"Oh, Mrs. Hu, how horrible! You told Mr. Li?" He knew the very things she had been most careful that no one should learn!

"I told them how your father had arranged the affair when you were very small and how angry your parents were with you for not following their wishes. I didn't mention the financial side — it was none of their business."

"Even so —" Shu-lan murmured.

"You can never keep it a secret," Mrs. Hu continued kindly. "Even if your family doesn't tell, sooner or later some of the church people here will learn why you were put out of the New Bridge church. You must make up your mind that it doesn't matter."

"I just can't stand the thought of all those men and boys over at the boys' school —" she stopped in confusion. "What did Mr. Hu and — and — and Mr. Li say?"

Mrs. Hu smiled. "Well, my husband said, 'She's as smart as she's pretty,' and Mr. Li said he'd already come to the conclusion from the way you managed the schoolgirls and put on that play that you have a lot of gumption."

"Then they didn't think I was awful?" Shu-lan's tone expressed unbelief.

"Quite the contrary!" Mrs. Hu replied. "And while we're on the subject of Mr. Li you might as well hear what else he said — it ought to cheer you up if you need cheering."

"What?" Shu-lan hardly breathed. If he only thought something nice!

"He said he supposed it was trite and perhaps any father seeing a pretty girl holding his motherless baby might react in the same way, but just the same he'd never seen anything cuter than you romping with Sunbeam, nor a picture prettier than the one you made smiling at him over her head."

At this Shu-lan's blushes entirely got the better of her. She turned and looked out into the yard so that Mrs. Hu could not see her face.

"Then my husband said a man would have to hunt a long time to find as nice a girl — you see he thinks he knows you from hearing me speak of you," Mrs. Hu added parenthetically. "Then Mr. Li said a group of you had had a long conversation at Yang Chuang that made him feel he knew you well — a lot better, as a matter of fact, than he could by a great many casual meetings. And then I told him I didn't believe that right now the finest man in the world could interest you in marriage, that you've had enough of the subject and have set your heart on being a schoolteacher. There, I guess that's everything we said."

Shu-lan could not make up her mind what she thought about all this. For some reason she did not feel so very much elated that Mr. Li had been told her plans for spend-

ing her life teaching school. Would he think that showed "gumption" too?

"And neither of them said anything about what a disgrace it is for me to be talked about everywhere as the girl who disobeyed her parents?" she asked.

"These two wouldn't be so impressed by the fact as by the reason why you did it. I'm sure there are thousands of people in the world who would say that you were justified — that your father and mother were wrong ever to have made such an engagement and equally wrong to try to hold you to it."

"Oh, I mustn't let you say my parents were wrong! What an unfilial daughter I am!"

"You still have the traditional village idea of what 'filial' means. In your heart you're as loyal a daughter as anybody else."

Shu-lan was silent. Thinking it over, she knew that this last remark of Mrs. Hu's was true — that she was not lacking in love and regard for her parents. Then perhaps the other was true also, that she was still bound by narrow old-country traditions. Big Brother had suggested that even in the village the younger men did not agree with the old women.

The batter was being made into small cakes of a kind new to Shu-lan. She would have liked to learn the recipe. At some other time she would ask about it. Just now she was too deeply interested in the conversation.

Mrs. Hu's forehead puckered into a little frown. "You see, Mr. Li is certain to marry again soon. He has dozens of friends and every one of them is sure to have at least one sister or cousin to suggest. I know for a fact that Mrs. Li hadn't been dead three days before the first match-maker came. Mr. Li was awfully upset by that. I wouldn't be surprised if there'd been more than fifty by now. We do so want him to find the right girl!"

Shu-lan was not surprised that his friends and possibly Mr. Li himself were seriously considering a second marriage. The Chinese have no custom which requires a man to wait any definite length of time to prove his devotion to his deceased wife. Being practical, they take for granted that if he has children he ought to secure a mother to look after them, and the sooner the better.

"Didn't you all think Sunbeam's mother was wonderful?" Shu-lan asked. "And didn't he choose her by himself?"

"It appeared so and in a way he did. That's one reason I'm afraid for him. He'll think he knows how. As a matter of fact, though, he has an older sister who is the head nurse in a hospital in Tientsin. We don't see her often, she has such heavy responsibilities there that she can't get away. But she knew Sunbeam's mother well and recommended her to a position in this hospital, and I'm sure she suggested her to Mr. Li. He has great respect for his sister's opinion. So have I. If she'd pick out a girl now I'd hope he would take her sight unseen, and it may be she will. She knows he won't be happy with just any nice-looking girl."

Shu-lan thought of Miss Kung. Now was the time to ask about her. For some indefinable reason she could not say the name.

"I can't talk Mr. Li out of the idea," Mrs. Hu continued, "that letting me take care of Sunbeam is an imposition. He'll soon discover that I'm going to have a baby of my own and then he'll think he must plan some other home for Sunbeam. He'll think anything I say to the contrary is just courtesy. I want him to marry again but I do hope he chooses wisely! He's such a dear!" Mrs. Hu sighed. "And it'll break my heart if he gets a wife who doesn't love Sunbeam."

Again there was a moment's silence. Shu-lan thought it was unnecessary for Mrs. Hu to worry about that. As if any woman could fail to love Sunbeam!

"But about my secret," she recalled Mrs. Hu to her original errand. "Perhaps you could ask them —"

"Oh, you can rest your heart," Mrs. Hu said confidently. "Neither of them is a gossip. They won't have said a word about it to anyone and I'll mention it to them this very day. You're nice to forgive me for telling them."

"Perhaps you're right and it doesn't matter so much as I thought," Shu-lan answered. She could hardly believe how much her tense attitude had changed in these few minutes. "Even so, I still want to put off the day when the students in both schools are talking about me." Shu-lan took a step or two toward the gate.

"By all means," Mrs. Hu agreed. "But aren't you coming in to see Sunbeam?"

"Is she awake?" Shu-lan asked, following Mrs. Hu to a door which led from the court directly into Sunbeam's room.

"Yes, she's in her play pen."

"I've never seen a play pen," Shu-lan confessed shyly.

"Her father had the carpenter copy one an American family had," Mrs. Hu explained. "Only this is on a little wooden platform to keep it off the brick floor. The Americans didn't need that because their floor was of wood." The two were entering Sunbeam's room. "This was our guest room," Mrs. Hu added.

The baby was ready to play the minute she caught sight of them. Shu-lan picked up the toys and shook the rattles for Sunbeam. Mrs. Hu standing watching them did not guess that her caller had never seen a guest room before either, and was making up the deficiency by a careful study of this one. At Lucky Inn Village people almost never had visitors who stayed overnight. During her school days Shu-lan had heard of rooms prepared especially for guests. Now she had seen one.

"This play pen's nice," Shu-lan commented thought-

fully. "People in the country could have a small one like it and put it on the brick bed."

"Easily," said Mrs. Hu.

Shu-lan decided that Lotus Bud was going to have one. She would tell Big Brother about it and he would see to it. After-school duties were waiting. Nevertheless Shu-lan played nearly half an hour with the baby before declaring she really must go. Sunbeam was so dear! But it would not do to let Mr. Li find her here again.

"I wish you'd keep on coming in this way," Mrs. Hu said as they walked toward the gate. "I don't go out a great deal but I like to see my friends."

With real anticipation Shu-lan promised.

The next day was cloudy and, because there was no sunshine, cool. Shu-lan kept thinking of Second Brother. Just before supper Miss Pan came over for a visit, and Shu-lan persuaded her to stand in the gateway of Court Eleven.

"I know it's not very proper," she explained, "but from here we can see the road and it might happen that while we're watching the boys would go by on their way back from Peking. Then I'd know Second Brother was safe."

Shu-lan had known Miss Pan would agree. After a little her small sister, looking out of the Pan gateway down the street and seeing the two teachers, came to play jackstones on the step by them. They sat down on the high sill of the gate. There was a light breeze from the east.

"It's going to rain," Shu-lan said. "Can't you feel it in the air? The country people haven't had a good rain yet."

"That's what it is to be a farmer's daughter," Miss Pan commented. "The first thing I think of when an east wind blows is that I don't own an umbrella."

"Let's make a wish that it'll rain in the night," Shu-lan answered, "then we won't need an umbrella."

"But if the roof's going to leak I hate it worse at night than in the daytime!" Miss Pan said. "I guess I'm hard to please," but she said it complacently, knowing that such was not really one of her faults.

After a while they were rewarded by the sight of at first two and later eight or ten more Pilgrim boys pedaling wearily along on the cross street.

"The last one's Second Brother," Shu-lan announced. "Now we can go inside and sit on chairs and behave like dignified young ladies."

But Miss Pan thought it must be suppertime and led her little sister home with a promise of something to eat.

The rain came in the night, as Shu-lan had hoped, softly at first and then a little more heavily. Its steady dripping from the eaves made a lulling sound, and regardless of whether or not roofs leaked it did not stop before morning brought the need for umbrellas.

Perhaps because so much of the year is sure to be dry and sunny, the attitude of people in North China toward the weather is very different from that to be found in climates where rain comes either during a long wet season or distributed at intervals throughout the year. For many northern Chinese, a rainstorm automatically cancels all engagements; they have no suitable protection or clothing to wear in a storm. During the two summer months in which there are constant heavy rains the women and girls especially try to stay at home except between downfalls.

So on this spring morning the fifth-grade girls stood in their dormitory doorways looking dolefully at the prospect. Then they put on their oldest shoes and hunted around for flour sacks or other large pieces of cloth to hold over their heads. Some used old garments, or the three-foot squares of cloth they sometimes wrapped bundles in. One or two had ancient oiled-paper parasols

which looked as if they had been handed down from an older sister.

Finally when it was time for the bell to ring, and the rain still continued a steady downpour, under whatever they had found to shield them, they ran as fast as they could through the slippery mud, arriving breathless at the shelter of their classroom.

All those who lived at a distance were absent except Ricksha Rider. Their homemade cloth shoes would certainly be ruined by such weather. Why spoil a pair of shoes merely for one day at school? Besides, who wanted to sit in wet clothes all day? At least a third of the seats were empty. The room was dark from the continuing rain. It dampened their spirits as it had already dampened their garments.

Too often spring rains were light. What the farmers hoped for was at least one early rain that would soak the ground thoroughly. These schoolgirls lived near enough to the source of their food supply so that upon being reminded how much good this rain would do to the crops, they brightened at once.

"It's rained through, hasn't it, Miss Chien?" they said in the common idiom for a soaking rain. Whereas a short time before they had been complaining about the discomfort, now like a group of farmers they congratulated each other. "There'll be good crops. It's rained through!"

Shu-lan rejoiced too, thinking of her father. He had counted on financial help from her which she could not give. But heaven was helping him. If the weather would only continue favorable through early summer until the wheat harvest in late June, he would not need money from his daughter.

It was the regular day for their music lesson but it was not surprising that no Miss Chung came from Peking.

"Please, Miss Chien," the fifth grade begged, "you

teach us to sing today." She knew how they loved their singing lesson. There would be no outside games. It was too bad to miss the music too.

"I haven't any new songs to teach you, but I'd like to hear the old ones you already know," she agreed.

First of all they stood and sang with loyal enthusiasm the school song, handed down from the beginnings of the school. To hear them, one would never guess what a struggle Miss Chung had had to make them memorize the difficult literary words. Then Shu-lan let them choose. They sang "Are You Sleeping" twice, following it with three or four more short ones which they had been practicing a great deal recently. They knew them well and sang them with enjoyment.

When it was time to choose another, Manager said, "We must sing the one called 'The Proud Cat.' We haven't sung it for a long time, but we always do when it rains because it's about a cat that carried his umbrella and wore his rubbers on a rainy day."

Shu-lan knew it was a favorite, its absurdity appealing to the children's sense of humor. But as soon as they began it, one voice came trailing after, saying the words later and singing the tune much lower than the others, badly off key. Shu-lan asked herself where she had heard that sort of thing before. Then she remembered. There was no harm in such nonsense when they were playing. But now they were in class. How dared anyone? She watched the faces of her more lively students to see who was doing it. Monkey's lips were saying the words in exact time. She was innocent. So were Manager — and Amah — and Baby — and Skeeter. But they were all bubbling with suppressed merriment. The little scamps! They must know who it was.

The song finished, they chose a springtime favorite, "All the Birds Have Come Again." As before, one voice

did not sing with the others. At the end of the first stanza, Miss Chien stopped them.

"Why does one girl sing that way?" she asked with a frown.

Someone giggled.

"It spoils the whole song. It's misbehaving," she added, looking around, still trying to discover the culprit. "How are you ever going to be a good citizen if you spoil the nice things other people do?" She could see that they did not think it was so funny now. "Finally now, who was doing it?"

She might have known she would get no answer. No one would tell on a classmate and now that she had scolded, the guilty child would not dare confess. Shu-lan, chagrined at having mismanaged the whole affair, stood looking at the roomful of girls. Ricksha Rider surprised her by standing up. Everyone in the room sat motionless. All eyes were fixed on the teacher. It was too bad that Ricksha Rider was going to tattle. She was already socially insignificant enough. There was no doubt that Shu-lan had a soft spot in her heart for this odd girl. She was so faithful and yet so unprepossessing! Ricksha Rider was waiting for permission to speak. It would hardly do to refuse now to let her tell. Blaming herself, Shu-lan repeated, more quietly, "Well, who did it, then?"

"I did it," Ricksha Rider said desperately. "I can't keep up when they sing a song I don't know." There were a dozen scattered giggles. The girl drooped over her desk and tears began to roll down her thin cheeks. "I don't mean to spoil the song. But anyway I don't write letters to boys!"

Shu-lan noticed that all over the room quick glances were exchanged. For the moment she was intent on comforting Ricksha Rider. It had been remarkably brave of her to confess, especially when she was being laughed at openly.

"It's not important if you didn't do it on purpose," her teacher said kindly, "and if you were doing your best. I wouldn't have scolded if I hadn't thought someone was trying to be funny. Don't worry about it any more." Then she looked up and down the rows. She could see only the tops of their heads. "Shame on you," she said, "for laughing at a classmate!" They knew what she meant.

It was afterward that she recalled what Ricksha Rider had said in her desperation, to justify herself. "Anyway, I don't write letters to boys." Surely, nobody did. Why mention it?

By the time classes were over the rain had become only a light drizzle. The girls slid and waded back to their dormitory through the mud on the poorly drained village street. Again, as earlier in the day, Shu-lan thought of her home folks and what a blessing this soaking rain was to them all. On Saturday her parents were coming to the Rural Service Center. Would they be willing to see the daughter they had disclaimed? What would Mr. Li think if they said harsh things about her? Mrs. Hu had been right. Sooner or later her friends and acquaintances at Tunghsien would learn of her parents' disapproval and the cause of it. How many of them would agree that she had been justified?

But Mr. Li—she would not have wanted to confess how often she thought of him. What did he think? Most important of all, did he think of her? She had reached her own room. As if walking in her sleep she put her books on the table and sat down, looking out of the window into the mist. With delicious leisureliness, she saw Mr. Li in her imagination, playing a violin in church, refereeing a basketball game, walking buoyantly along the street, sitting by Miss Fu's desk, listening to the conversation during dinner at Yang Chuang. But most often he was stand-

ing by a door holding Sunbeam and on his face was that inscrutable half-smile.

While in her mind she saw the pictures, she also heard and mused over the things he had said: "He'd never seen a prettier picture"; "You have gumption"; "He felt as if he knew you." She had seen him so few times! Why did she too feel as if she knew him better than many people with whom she had been acquainted for years?

After a while she recalled herself from her dreaming and tackled the day's arithmetic papers. "What do I care what he's doing or what he thinks?" She corrected the papers with more than ordinary energy to prove to herself how much she enjoyed the tasks of teaching. But the next day and the next, in fact every day, she caught herself daydreaming and always the subject of her thoughts was the same athletic figure and the same handsome smiling face. Sometimes she wondered about the next time they should meet. If he should look at her that way again, she knew she would blush and stammer. She would not be able to help it; and then what would he think!

Spring had already come before the rain. Now when the sun came out again, green growing things fairly burst themselves with the joy of living. Grass and shrubs and willows which had bravely put out leaves now became a more luxuriant, richer green. Buds of ginkgo and poplar trees broke into jade and silver. The gray brick walls of both the Pilgrim schools were covered by the fresh leaves of Boston ivy called "mountain-climbing tiger" by the Chinese. Between many of the buildings were untrimmed hedges of yellow roses. Before the rain a few blossoms had appeared. Now within a day the bushes were covered with flowers. In several places on the grounds great wisteria vines climbed on trellises as high as the roofs of houses. These too were suddenly tassels. The mild fragrance of all

the other flowers was entirely lost in the heavy sweetness of locust blossoms. Into the locust trees bees rushed, as frantically as late Christmas shoppers, carried out loads of delicate honey, and hurried back for more. As always in North China the tentative warm advances and discouraging cold retreats of spring were suddenly giving way to the assurance of summer.

Being a girl, Shu-lan was of course not expecting to be present at the dinner party Mr. and Mrs. Chien were giving in honor of Mr. Li, to express their gratitude for his part in bringing their son back to them. But she did not forget it. When Saturday came she pictured her parents and Big Brother starting early from Lucky Inn Village to catch the morning train. That Mrs. Chien should leave her home to make such an unaccustomed journey proved how much she wanted to show approval of Second Brother. As recently as Chinese New Year, had she not scolded continually because he stubbornly balked her wishes about an early marriage? The old lady had now forgotten all that. Today she thought only that her son's life had been threatened by the unpredictable whims of cruel bandits and that he was safe again.

Busy in the classroom all morning, Shu-lan still thought occasionally of the approaching feast. What would Mr. Li think of the Chien family? He already knew quite a little about them. It was because she had spoken so freely to the Rural Service Center staff members about her brother and her home that Mr. Li had said he felt he knew her. "Better than I could by a great many casual meetings," he had said. He would not be surprised that her parents were old-fashioned.

When school was out at twelve, Shu-lan went out of her way in order to pass the gateway of the Center. She had thought perhaps Big Brother might be loitering about the entrance, waiting to welcome his guests. But only the

gatekeeper in his little room guarded the gate with the help of a mongrel black dog stretched sleepily on the step.

Then before she came to the cross street, she saw coming toward her a group of men led by Second Brother. They were, of course, those whom her father had invited from the boys' school. All were dressed in long, dark silk garments and sauntered with a leisurely unconcern lest they seem too eager. There was no way to avoid meeting them. She could not ignore them. They would guess correctly that childish curiosity had brought her past the place of festivities. With too-rosy cheeks she stopped a few steps before she met the group and bowed ceremoniously without a word. They too stopped and bowed in return. A few murmured "Miss Chien." She had been so confused she had not been able to take note of every one, but with Mr. Li had been the boys' school principal, the dean, and the head athletic director. She had caught sight of the head of the department of Chinese literature, the chemistry teacher, and Mr. Hu. Tagging along behind was Johnnie Lin.

Shu-lan glimpsed Second Brother, a little self-conscious because he was the reason for so much ado, but when she had passed the group, what she remembered was the expression on Mr. Li's face, pleasant and courteous. She had been afraid he would make her blush by some reminder of that thrilling moment. But in his eyes there was no hint of anything more than ordinary acquaintance. To her surprise, she was disappointed. Perhaps he had not meant anything by the look she remembered so constantly.

Though Shu-lan had hoped to see some member of her family before the dinner, now she knew it would be at least two hours before they would be free again. After her lunch, she thought of calling on Mrs. Hu and then decided some other time would be better. It would be too bad to go at Sunbeam's naptime. Oh, well, there were

always notebooks to grade. It seemed a pity to waste on papers the hours of such a lovely day. But if she stayed in her room she would be available any time Big Brother might come. Certainly someone would report to her about the party. She sat down at her desk and began to work.

Her twenty-four charges in the dormitory were busy as usual with their Saturday afternoon tasks. In fact they were busier than usual. All the padded garments worn in the winter had to be ripped up and washed so they could be put away. The clotheslines were full these days. Wang Ma managed such matters, often with help from Auntie or one of the other room monitors. Shu-lan was seldom called on to settle a dispute. Hence she was surprised in the midst of correcting her papers to hear Wang Ma's voice outside her door calling across the courtyard, "I'll see if Miss Chien can lend us some bluing."

"Bluing?" Shu-lan inquired as the woman came in.

"I've plenty," she whispered breathlessly, with a grin, "but I've been trying to get a good chance to tell you about the letters, and the girls are always underfoot."

"What letters?" Shu-lan wondered.

"The girls say Ricksha Rider told on them but you didn't catch on so they think it's a good joke on you. They know you haven't seen your Second Brother yet — they were saying so just now in the laundry — so I want you to know before you do see him, so they'll know he didn't tell."

"What are you talking about?" Shu-lan asked more puzzled than ever. How could her girls know anything about Second Brother's letters?

Wang Ma gave a quick glance out of the door. "You'd better call them on the carpet pretty soon so they'll know you know." She started out.

"What! Who wrote what letters?" Shu-lan whispered loudly after her.

"Oh!" Wang Ma suddenly realized she had left out a vital point and came back. "Amah, Old Man, Sonny, and Four Eyes."

Then suddenly it became clear to Shu-lan. How provoking! She had been so sure that between her Second Brother and these young girls there was no danger of romantic interest. Yet all the while their teacher had been dreaming of a handsome athletic director, her pupils had been admiring the young hero who had come safely back from being kidnaped by the notorious Liu Kuei-tang and whose modest and nonchalant report they had heard at firsthand. They had not only admired him but they had written notes and sneaked them over to the boys' school! This, as every one of them knew, was a serious offence. Shu-lan spent her next two hours quizzing and disciplining them. If, during the conversations, she allowed them to think she had known of their misdemeanor for several days and had been waiting only to take advantage of the leisure of Saturday for judgment day, her deception was no worse than that of any other schoolteacher before and since.

A little after three both her brothers came. Shu-lan welcomed and brought them into her room, leaving the door open to the springtime. Her mind was still disturbed by the unpleasant task she had just finished. She spoke in a low voice to Second Brother.

"I suppose you are laughing at me because I couldn't keep my students from doing improper things."

Second Brother waved the topic aside with an impatient frown. "I pay no attention to them — they are only children. Every class has in it someone who breaks rules sooner or later. I hope you don't need to see the letters. I threw them away."

"I don't need them," his sister assured him. "I've already meted out the punishment. Bothersome young females! I've just finished with them. Let's talk about some-

thing nice." She turned to Big Brother. "How are our father and mother?"

"Well pleased to have fulfilled their obligation."

"That trip of mine to Peking was going to be so cheap!" remarked Second Brother, his tone regretful. "I borrowed a bicycle to save paying eighty cents railroad fare there and back. It cost father plenty before we got through."

"I suppose he paid for the bicycle?" Shu-lan said.

"That was the first thing," Second Brother answered, "then my fare back from Shun Teh, and half of Mr. Li's expenses there and back, and today this dinner."

"How much did the dinner cost?" Shu-lan inquired.

"Fifty dollars," Big Brother answered, "but look what we got for it!"

"You should have seen it!" Second Brother exclaimed enthusiastically.

"It was all right, wasn't it!" Big Brother was proud of his successful arrangements.

"What did you have?"

"Chicken velvet, fish with sweet-sour sauce, sea slugs, red haw jelly, eight-precious pudding, apricot-seed gelatine —" Second Brother named the dishes that had made the deepest impression on him regardless of the order in which they had been served.

"Shark's fins?" Shu-lan asked.

"You couldn't expect anything so fancy as that," her brother objected. "We had duck-in-doilies though, and that's nearly as good."

"What about vegetables?"

"We had all the nicest ones that are in season: bamboo shoots, candied yams, mushrooms with clams, fried water chestnuts, lotus seeds — and lots of silver-thread rolls."

"You make me hungry!" Shu-lan said. "What kind of soup did you end with?"

"We had cucumber broth halfway through so we ended

with orange soup," Second Brother answered, "and I thought it was extra good. Even stuffed as full as I was, I drank two bowls of it, and I noticed Mr. Li did too."

"Did he seem to enjoy it all?" Shu-lan asked with as much unconcern as she could muster.

"I'm sure he should have," Second Brother answered. "Father made a nice little speech — you know, the sort of thing he ought to say, thanking Mr. Li for going on such a wearisome trip, and the principal for letting him go, and so on. Father's so happy since this big rain soaked his fields that he sounded unusually genial. And he didn't get tangled up at all or scared of all the celebrities he had as guests."

"Who all were there?" Shu-lan asked next. "I mean besides the ones I saw."

"Oh," Second Brother replied, "the others were all from the Rural Service Center. We had sixteen men altogether at the tables."

"And I suppose mother fluttered around wishing she could boss the men from the restaurant the way she does Sister-in-law," Shu-lan guessed.

"Fortunately she was a little bit afraid of them," Second Brother reported.

"But she accomplished what she came for," Big Brother said. "She got a chance to cry over Second Brother here —" Shu-lan laughed when he began to sputter in protest. Teasing was fun when it was not directed at her. "And she came into the room where all the party was assembled, to thank Mr. Li and give him a kowtow —"

"And he let her?" Shu-lan exclaimed in amazement.

"Of course not!" both brothers agreed, and then Second Brother went on. "But she made the motions and that's what counts, and then, as though it was in her own house, she disappeared with great dignity leaving the men

to their feast. I'm sure mother got a great thrill out of it."
"She's greatly taken with Mr. Li too," Big Brother added.

"Oh, sister, you should hear her!" Second Brother emphasized this point. "She claims she thinks I'm all right, but she can't get over what gentlemen my teachers are, and it's plain she likes him much the best of all."

"I'm glad everything went on smoothly," Shu-lan said. There was a short pause. Then, "Big Brother," she begged, "I know there's no use arguing with mother. But when you see a good chance, remind father that the real reason he's angry with me is because I wouldn't use my money for Second Brother. Since it wasn't needed for that purpose, can't he forgive me for using it the way I did?"

Second Brother was puzzled. "What do you mean by using or not using your money for me?"

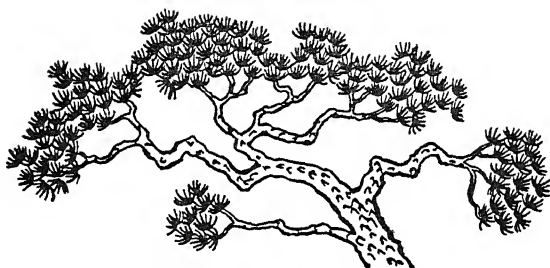
Shu-lan remembered that she had not yet told him about all that had happened while he was away. "I'll tell you sometime," she put him off again. "But Big Brother, please — if he's angry over that it's not fair."

"The hardest thing for father to forgive," Big Brother answered, "is that you wouldn't make a promise to use the money that way if it was needed. But I think he can forgive that now that things have turned out all right."

"And if he's angry because I didn't marry Wu you ought to be able to talk him out of that too. He can't still hold the idea that it was my duty, can he, while people in his own village claim it was a good thing I got out of it?" She spoke with feeling and both brothers nodded their heads in agreement.

"I think father'll forgive you," Big Brother said. "I'll talk to him. And some day we'll manage to persuade mother too."

Shu-lan was comforted because she believed they would.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SHU-LAN WAS BUOYANTLY HAPPY. HER HEART was so light it sometimes felt lighter than the rest of her. Whenever she thought how joyous life had become, and she could not but think of it often, she could easily explain it. As far back as she could remember she had always had to live in the present because the future was a prospect too unpleasant to contemplate. Now because the future was waiting to be molded into almost any pattern she chose, her present was also set free. Disagreeable incidents at school happened rarely, satisfying ones often. Laughter was a constant attendant at grade five. Shu-lan's relations with her students and fellow teachers seldom caused any irritation or discord. She had every reason to be happy.

But none of these things accounted for the suggestion of a smile that often hovered over her face during the days of May. She was not conscious of it. If she had been, she could not have explained it. She did not know she was rapidly falling in love. The ways in which American girls learn about such things were remote from her experience. She had never seen lovers on the screen, nor even read about them in books. It was not that Chinese novels are reticent — quite the contrary — but she had never read the novels. Above all, there is not the same tradition passed on from one generation of girls to the next. Country girls in China all expect to be married sometime. The fact that in the whole circle of their ac-

quaintance there is hardly a single old maid gives certainty to the prospect. According to custom widows do not remarry but widowers do, and promptly, so there are always enough men to go around. Through long centuries marriages have been arranged by parents or older friends usually far in advance of the wedding itself.

Among the girls there is plenty of talk of going to a mother-in-law, or going "out the gate," as the Chinese speak of a girl's marriage, but not with the occidental idea of first falling in love. And how that felt — Shu-lan was utterly unsophisticated in such matters.

Like all the others, in spite of having broken her childhood engagement, she too supposed that some day she would marry. It was certain not to be within the next two years. That had been settled by the amount of time it would take to pay her debt. After that she was going to be a schoolteacher like Miss Fu. She probably would be married sometime but the day was a long way off.

The day after the Chien's dinner for Mr. Li, Shu-lan walked to church with Miss Pan, as she often did. They seldom stopped after the service to chat with anyone. On this Sunday, however, an aunt of Miss Pan's was waiting for the two teachers as they came out of the door. Since her home was in a remote part of the city, whenever she made an effort to walk such a long way to church she was sure to buttonhole her niece for family news to carry back with her. When the two girls saw her they knew they were trapped and accepted the inevitable. Miss Pan talked to her aunt as fast as she could while Shu-lan stood watching the rest of the congregation go by.

Only women came out of the doorway where they were standing. The schoolgirls had managed to hurry out first while the older women were speaking to friends and neighbors. Shu-lan greeted those she knew, wives of staff members of the various institutions, and relatives of a number

of the students. At the very last there was a group who interested her more than all the others. Miss Kung had guests who had been waiting for her inside while she was playing the recessional.

First came Mrs. Kung, a comfortable-looking matron at fifty, with three bright little children and two young women. The latter must surely be her married daughters or daughters-in-law. Behind, with Miss Kung, were two younger women who might be friends of hers from Peking. Shu-lan studied them with an interest which became keener when a group of young men came out of the other door of the church and joined them. The women walked in front at the leisurely pace set by Mrs. Kung and the children. The men behind were gesturing in animated conversation. Shu-lan knew only two of them, Mr. Li and a son of the Kungs who was a Y.M.C.A. secretary in Peking. The men were dressed in Western-style clothes. Mr. Li in a light-gray flannel suit was the best looking of them all, she could easily see.

They were turning a corner out of sight when Miss Pan's aunt finally said her farewell and started in the other direction. For once Shu-lan was the one who had the news to tell.

"Hurry up!" she whispered, to be sure Miss Pan's aunt could not hear her. "Miss Kung has ever so many guests and —" she started to say that Mr. Li was among them, but caught herself in time and ended, "and let's catch up so we can watch them."

It was not very dignified to hurry, but once they were in sight of the Kung party it was easy to come close enough to observe without being too obviously interested.

"They're the second daughter and the third daughter-in-law." Miss Pan had known the neighbor family all her life. "But I don't know the two girls with Miss Kung."

"Who are the men?"

"There's one I don't know. Then there's Mr. Li, of course, and the others are all Kungs, brothers of Miss Kung. The oldest one's a doctor, the second one's in the Y.M.C.A., and the third works in a bank. That's the one next to Mr. Li."

Shu-lan could catch glimpses of their faces only when they turned toward each other in conversation.

"Gowns are longer and narrower than ever and slit higher on the sides, evidently," Miss Pan commented, giving a disgusted glance at her own which was only to her ankles and so wide it scarcely needed to be slit at all.

Shu-lan, conscious that hers, made only a year before, came nearer the requirements of fashion, answered, "Theirs are lovely, aren't they?"

"I like the lavender flowered one best," Miss Pan declared, "but the jade green is pretty too. Look at the sleeves! My mother would never let me out of the house with sleeves like that!" The garments in question had practically none. Shu-lan had been conservative the year before and her sleeves came halfway down to her elbows, whereas poor Miss Pan's were at least six inches longer.

"You can cut off an inch or two and let your mother get used to that before you cut off a little more," Shu-lan suggested, "and as soon as you are away from home roll them up two or three inches. Everybody does that." Miss Pan was not pretty to begin with and had such ordinary clothes it was a pity that in addition they had to be old-fashioned to humor her mother.

The girls drew a little closer and studied the costumes in greater detail, commenting as well on the hair and posture of the Peking ladies and unconsciously imitating them. But Shu-lan's eyes did not stay with the pretty clothes. Neither, apparently, did Miss Pan's.

"I wonder if you'll believe me now," she said. "I told you Mr. Li goes over there all the time and that Miss

Kung will be marrying him one of these days, whenever he gets around to wanting it." She gloated so plainly that Shu-lan was a little piqued.

"Did I ever say she wouldn't? Or that anyone would care?" Shu-lan felt Miss Pan's glance. That last remark had been a mistake. She tried to allay suspicion. "As a matter of fact, they must be almost the same age with lots of the same friends and interests. I don't see why they shouldn't enjoy each other's company very much. Besides, Miss Kung isn't teaching or anything. It must be dull just staying at home."

"As if she won't be staying at home after she's married!"

This time Shu-lan did not speak. She only thought the answer. "It wouldn't be too dull staying at home with Sunbeam."

The distance from the church was less than half a mile. They passed under an arched bridge near the boys' school, following the sunken road where the shadows cast by trees on both sides gave a pleasant relief from the noon sun. Shu-lan had urged Miss Pan to hurry so they could watch Miss Kung and her friends. In reality there was nothing to see except some well-behaved people walking home from church and entering the red gate of a residence where they would doubtless eat their Sunday dinner.

Miss Pan was full of satisfaction that her prophecy about Miss Kung's interest in Mr. Li seemed to have foundation, in fact seemed to be already so far on the way to fulfillment, that this was observable by even the least credulous. Shu-lan was not full of satisfaction. She felt tired. She had seen enough of Miss Kung, her pretty clothes, her big home, and her friends. It was nothing to her, one way or the other; and surely she did not begrudge Mr. Li a good dinner at the Kungs'!

Practice for the track meet had not slowed down, but children with as much energy as the fifth graders could manage other interests simultaneously. The elm trees were covered with seeds, called "elm cash" by the Chinese. Before school on Monday someone started the idea that those of the class who lived in Court Eleven must have a meal of elm-cash cakes.

"We ought to eat everything during its season, as it comes along," Manager urged. "Confucius said so, didn't he, Ricksha Rider?"

The scholar of the class, publicly appealed to, corroborated Manager's statement by giving chapter and verse in the "Analects." Her pale face flushed with pleasure over being noticed by Manager. "What he really said was that he wouldn't eat things out of season," she added in the interests of accuracy.

"That's not much different from what I said, because where would you get them any other time?" Manager insisted. "And this is the right season to eat elm cash."

"I've no objection," Shu-lan said, "only it takes a good many seeds and Wang Ma isn't going to collect them for you."

"Oh, that's all right. We'll gather and take them to her at recess." Two or three of the class were not afraid to climb trees, but more ran along the paths to find a likely elm, then pulled down the lowest branches and stripped off the seeds. They tied them into their handkerchiefs or stuffed them into their book bags and rushed to Wang Ma with them.

The cakes were not good, being completely tasteless, but the girls stubbornly declared they were delicious and that they must have a second meal of them. It mattered not in the least to Shu-lan. She gave her consent to as many such meals as they wanted. Small unimportant mat-

ters never irritated Shu-lan these days. "She's so good-natured, probably because it's only a few weeks until school is out and after that she can't have us for her class any more," they said. "She has always liked us."

During the afternoon session a question kept bothering her. She wanted to go after school to see Mrs. Hu and play with Sunbeam. Should she? But she simply must not let Mr. Li find her there. She argued with herself that it would be easy. Long before he arrived to play with the baby she would have returned to Court Eleven. But once — one memorable time — it had not turned out that way. Right in the middle of geography class, while standing in dignity apparently listening to the recitation, she suddenly felt again Mr. Li's hands firmly covering hers. Her face flushed pink and into her eyes came for a moment a flash of delight that had nothing to do with the length of the Yangtze River. In her mind she heard a reproachful small voice, "The reason you want to go is in hope of seeing him again." "It is not!" she answered the little voice rudely.

The debate was won by the affirmative. Soon after school was out Shu-lan was on her way to Mrs. Hu's pretty home. Her hostess began at once to prepare tea while Shu-lan played with the baby. Today she was dressed in yellow jacket and trousers and looked more like a Sunbeam. She could say "ba-ba" for "father," and little words which meant "no" and "cracker." She practiced them, looking all the while at Shu-lan with big serious eyes. When the tea was ready Sunbeam was given a cracker in her play pen, while Mrs. Hu and Shu-lan, sitting in her room, drank their tea beside her.

"I didn't get out to church yesterday," Mrs. Hu began. "Did you see Miss Kung's guests for her engagement party?"

Shu-lan's heart stood still. So that was what it was! All settled! "Yes, — oh, yes," she faltered, "Miss Pan and I walked home behind them."

"Then you saw the groom," Mrs. Hu said cheerfully. It was an odd way for her to speak of Mr. Li.

"Yes, indeed," Shu-lan answered. "There was quite a company and we saw them all but we didn't know what they were up to."

"I think it's very nice for her," Mrs. Hu continued.

"Isn't it for him too? Do you think — do you like her well enough for him?"

"Oh, of course!" Mrs. Hu answered enthusiastically. "Miss Kung is a lovely girl. She's nice enough for any man living."

"And will she like Sunbeam?" Shu-lan looked at the baby who, having devoured the cracker, was now contentedly trying to chew the leg off a rubber elephant.

Mrs. Hu looked up quickly. "What's that about Sunbeam?" she asked.

Shu-lan gave a nervous giggle. "It's only that I remember you said it would break your heart if Mr. Li married anyone who didn't love Sunbeam."

"What are you talking about?" Mrs. Hu stared at Shu-lan.

"Why, about Miss Kung being engaged to Mr. Li. Isn't that what you're talking about?"

"Where did you ever get such an idea? She's not engaged to Mr. Li!"

"I thought you just told me she was, and that they announced it yesterday."

"She's engaged, but it's to a Mr. Yang who works in the same bank with her brother. I thought you said you saw the bridegroom."

"I did. I saw all of them. But Miss Pan and I —" To tell the truth, she and Miss Pan had known very little

about it. She ended in a mumble, "I suppose we must have been guessing."

In an instant Shu-lan almost forgot the embarrassment over having made such a mistake as the exultant thought shouted itself in her mind: "Mr. Li is not engaged to Miss Kung! He isn't going to be!"

Mrs. Hu was talking as calmly as before, not guessing how her words were accompanied by the joyous throbbing of Shu-lan's heart. "I can't imagine," she was saying, "where you got the idea that Mr. Li was interested in her. Of course he goes there a lot, because the Kungs' third son who works in the bank was a classmate of Mr. Li's and they've always been special friends. So has this Mr. Yang who's engaged to Miss Kung. But everybody goes to the Kungs!"

"It was just — we — Miss Pan said — I mean —" Shu-lan's tongue had become so entangled that for the moment she could not straighten it out.

Mrs. Hu looked at her with surprise. "What's this? Why Shu-lan. You weren't thinking of him for yourself, were you?"

Shu-lan did not meet her friend's eyes. Her face was hot. "Of course not!" she denied with emphasis. "You know better than that. Do you suppose after all the trouble I've had getting rid of an engagement — Of course not!"

Sunbeam was holding herself up by hanging onto one side of the play pen. Shu-lan ran over and picked her up.

"You know I can't help comparing her to my little nieces," she changed the subject without apology. "Sunbeam is so responsive! Our Sugarball is nearly two years old but she's a shy country child afraid of strangers."

Sunbeam proved that she was not, or else that she no longer considered Shu-lan a stranger, by grabbing the frogs that buttoned her collar and trying to jerk them off.

Mrs. Hu gave Shu-lan an amused glance and followed along on the new topic. She watched Sunbeam's vigorous exertions, and quoted the proverb: " ' If you want your children to be submissive, let them always be a little hungry and cold.' "

" This young person has been well fed! "

" Yes, yet for all she likes rough and tumble play she's sensitive to the attitude of the folks around her. She's happy as a sparrow all day long. She loves to be with people but she begins to cry if anyone speaks to her in too serious a tone. That's the worst punishment she's ever had, because it's always more than sufficient. I don't know what she'd do if anyone were really cross with her."

Shu-lan thought again of Sugarball who had had to toughen herself to scoldings and slaps and who was to grow up hearing her grandmother reiterate her disappointment that her grandchildren were both girls. " Sunbeam's a lucky baby! " she said softly, giving her a final hug. " Well, I must go. Thank you for the tea. I won't dare come if you go to so much bother every time." She tried to put the baby back into her play pen, but Sunbeam protested so loudly that Mrs. Hu carried her along to see Shu-lan to the gate.

" Oh! " Shu-lan said suddenly when they were nearly there, then stopped in confusion and began again. " Mrs. Hu, please don't mention to Mr. Li that I thought he was engaged to Miss Kung." She was patting the baby and smiling at her in order to appear casual.

Once more Mrs. Hu looked at her with amusement. " Oh, no, don't make me promise. It isn't worth telling him anyway. What's important about that? "

What was, indeed? Shu-lan could not say. So she had to leave with the suspicion that she might again be the topic of conversation between Mrs. Hu and Mr. Li. What would he ever think of her!

On her way back to Court Eleven, she said to herself: "So Mrs. Hu suspects me of wishing I could marry Mr. Li, does she? She knows better. She knows I love teaching school, and that I couldn't be married if I wanted to until that debt is paid. What's more, she knows perfectly well the kind of girl Mr. Li's sister will pick out for him —"

The school year was nearly over. How fast it had flown! Suddenly Shu-lan remembered that for the first time since she had gone to boarding school as a little girl, she could not look forward to going home. Before her mind came the picture of the Chien courtyard as it had appeared every June when she arrived for summer vacation. An old hen was sure to be scratching to find food for her chicks. Blackie the dog always jumped and barked a welcome. There might be a few fragrant apricots on the scrawny tree by the gate. This year Sugarball would be outside the house playing. She would be learning to talk too, and Lotus Bud — the thought of the children made Shu-lan homesick. And she herself? Where would she be? When she had wanted to be free of young Wu she had told Big Brother how easy it would be for her to stay away from home and make her own way in the world. Remembering now that boast, she set her lips tightly together. All right, she would take her share of the disagreeable results which had followed her break with tradition, and no one should hear her complain.

There was no problem of finding a place to stay. At Pilgrim there were always a score or more of the students who were too far from home to go back for vacations, or like Auntie, no longer had a home. Shu-lan had never before even wondered how such girls might feel. This summer she would be one of them.

The busy days passed swiftly. Shu-lan's were full of dreams. She rejoiced that she had exchanged a lifetime slavery for a two-year contract to pay a loan. It was a

burden — her price of freedom — but not too heavy for her to bear, and therefore uniquely her own. If amongst her happy dreams, and tempering a little the certain delightful memories which insisted on returning, the caution would occasionally intrude itself, "You couldn't get married if you wanted to," still she had no regret. It was a good thing she thought, that she loved teaching so much that doing it to earn the money she needed was no hardship. She reminded herself that if a fairy godmother had given her the whole world to choose from, certainly teaching school would be her deliberate choice.

On Sunday morning Shu-lan, dressing for church, remembered the Sunday before and looked at her wardrobe with much the distaste that a prisoner feels when preparing to make a dinner of bread and water. Miss Kung's guests had worn lavender, jade, gold — the loveliest colors. Shu-lan was sure the materials had been as lovely and undoubtedly expensive. Certainly they were cut in the latest style.

Shu-lan had only two "good" gowns. They had both been made for her graduation in Peking. Until last week she had always thought of them as new. They were a year old! On ordinary occasions she wore light blue, her old senior middle school uniforms. Many of the teachers did the same. She put them aside scornfully. He would think her entirely lacking in imagination and good taste. A lump came into her throat. It was not good taste she lacked. It was pretty new gowns. Should she wear the yellow voile which she had made for class day, or the cream-colored silk which had been her commencement dress? She studied them and finally chose the cream Szechuan crepe. It was fashionably long and narrow and as she walked the handmade lace on her slip flicked out and in the long slits up the sides. The road would not be dusty.

She put on her best shoes, foreign-style white canvas pumps.

Her costume still lacked one thing to make it as pretty as it could be. She went to church by way of the main schoolyard and there, choosing the loveliest of the yellow roses which were still in bloom, she slipped its short stem securely through the loop which buttoned her gown on the shoulder. She was not satisfied, but it was the best she could do.

There was plenty of time. In front of her and behind her on the path were other churchgoers. As she approached the building she began to recognize the people standing outside the door visiting quietly. Then, among them, she saw him. She must try to feign unconcern as she walked by. But before she reached the group in which he stood, he was coming to meet her.

"Good morning, Miss Chien." She never failed to notice how pleasing his deep voice sounded.

She met his eyes as she answered him. His smile was more than friendly. It expressed approval.

"I'm saving myself a trip to the girls' school by way-laying you at church. I hope you don't mind."

"Whatever's most convenient," she murmured. It was hard to talk to him because her heart was dancing so.

"Perhaps you've heard that the spring track meet is next Saturday," he said. "I suppose the boys' committee will write you a proper letter to ask you to give out the prizes, but —" he paused just long enough to emphasize what followed, "I wanted to ask you myself." He was walking with her toward the women's entrance.

"Me?" Shu-lan echoed incredulously. "How could I do it?"

"I think you're just the one. We always pick the prettiest teacher."

"But I'm not pretty!" How he embarrassed her, say

ing such things! Her face was hot and her hands trembling. She put them behind her, nervously twisting her fingers together, impatient with herself at her lack of poise. She could feel his eyes on her face. She dared not look up.

"If you could see yourself now —"

She must change the subject. "They used to have two," she remembered.

"That's right. We're inviting Miss Shang too."

"And I'm to help her?" At last she had the courage to peek at him. The smile with which he regarded her was like the look which for many days had filled her dreams. They were at the door. He bowed slightly and thanked her as she left him.

It was after she was seated that into the pious thoughts which belonged to that place there intruded a very worldly one. What should she wear? For the next two years she was going to have no new clothes. She would always have only three dresses to choose from. And to think that her mother was angry because she was sure she was the one who suffered most from that broken engagement!

Preparations for the track meet grew in intensity until those who had registered for various events came into morning and afternoon classes with perspiring faces nearly purple from exertion. Shu-lan, looking forward to her part, also counted the days until Saturday. During the week, she thought once or twice of calling on Mrs. Hu. She wanted to go but — Well, anyway, she would see him on Saturday.

Thursday, the sky was dull and Friday there were showers, but Saturday dawned clear and fresh. The track meet was to open at eight. At the girls' school, breakfast over, the participants in yellow shirts and blue shorts buzzed about importantly. Those who were not taking

part, dressed in light-blue uniforms, lined up two by two behind the blue-and-gold school banner.

A few minutes later, when the Pilgrim girls arrived at the field they found the small cement grandstand empty. There would not be enough seats for all the hundreds of students who would attend, but space in the stand had been assigned to each school and those who found no place to sit could move about on the large grassy grounds. Shu-lan led her charges to the seats allotted them and looked around. In front of the grandstand, inside an oval made by the running track was a temporary pavilion of boards and split-reed mats for the use of the officials of the meet. Above it was a loud-speaker which would announce events and call the participants. The oval space held also the paraphernalia used in broad jumping, high jumping, pole vaulting, and the hurdle races. Already the higher ground on all sides outside the oval was full of students. In the pavilion and on the field Pilgrim Boys' School faculty and older students were at their assigned places. Shu-lan immediately discovered Mr. Li on the grounds. She was going to have a chance to look at him whenever she liked without being noticed.

Shu-lan sitting among her fifth graders was ready to enjoy everything as much as they did. She listened to their comments as they watched the arrival of other schools. Most of what she heard indicated satisfaction with their own school and mild disdain toward everybody else. Other peoples' uniforms were not pretty or their hair was untidy or their manners inelegant. If there was anything amusing, the fifth graders never failed to note it. Shu-lan let her eyes follow wherever the children pointed. They named people who caught their attention. She saw Second Brother with a sheaf of papers and looked forward to a chance to talk to him sometime during the day.

Once the program was in full swing it furnished plenty to keep both eyes and ears busy. The beautiful early summer morning was still cool. Overhead was the bluest of skies. Around the field on every side were tall willows and elms washed clean by yesterday's showers. Shu-lan, like the children about her, rejoiced in the holiday gaiety of the crowd and entered into the excitement of each contest.

According to Pilgrim custom the entire student body attended the opening exercises of a meet such as the one today, but anyone was permitted to return to school whenever she wearied of the entertainment. Nor were the teachers considered as police set to watch the students. They too were free to go or stay. There was always a great deal of running back and forth in the crowd.

So after an hour or more, Shu-lan was attracted to a group of teachers at the far end of the grandstand. For the moment the contestants were younger children and therefore less interesting to her than her own girls, or the older better athletes. She started in the direction of her friends but progress was slow. She met acquaintances each of whom wanted to chat. Several minutes later she noticed Second Brother coming through the crowd and changed her course in order to meet him.

"Jolly, isn't it?" he remarked.

"Lots of fun," she answered, then hastened to ask, "Have you heard from home lately?"

"Not a word, but they're too busy to come in." He was interrupted by Mr. Li's hand on his shoulder.

"Good morning, Miss Chien." Although he was busy as one of the officials at the meet, his expression was animated rather than harassed. "You haven't forgotten about the prizes, I hope."

"How could I?" she answered gayly. "At four, isn't that the time?"

"That's right." He turned with a comradely look at Second Brother. "Has your brother told you the good news? He won a scholarship in spite of having spent three weeks with Liu Kuei-tang." He gave Second Brother a whack on the shoulder and strode off toward the athletic director's office.

"Wonderful!" Shu-lan cried. "Good for you! Oh, I'm so glad!" Her face confirmed her words, and her brother watching her grinned sheepishly.

"Just luck," he mumbled, "I'd happened to have studied the very things they asked."

Shu-lan giggled. "You're telling that to a school-teacher."

"So it turned out that I wasn't so unfortunate as I thought." He spoke seriously. "I'll have the scholarship at the university, and at the same time I unexpectedly learned a lot about what goes on in the world. I feel five years older than those innocent kids." He waved a hand toward the track meet.

"I'd rather you had waited a while before learning some of it," Shu-lan answered, also serious.

Then his mood changed. "And speaking of growing up, you've been doing it yourself. I haven't paid any attention to you these last few summers at home, not since we used to play together before we came away to school. But I don't blame Mr. Li for looking at you that way just now —"

"Nonsense! What way?" Shu-lan interrupted him. "He never even noticed me!" She could not control the telltale cheeks.

"Um-m-m-m —"

Mr. Li was a subject which was always interesting, but Shu-lan saw her brother so seldom that she wanted to use this opportunity to talk about something else. She had on her conscience a question that concerned him. "It's

grand that you've won the scholarship, and that's the important thing," she said, "but going to the university will cost a lot besides. I wanted to help you with books and clothes, but I can't now with this debt of mine to pay. What'll you do?"

"I've thought about that. If crops are good, father can help some. I'm used to being economical. Mr. Li says he thinks I can find work copying — I guess he got the idea from my writing letters for Liu Kuei-tang. I'll try hard to find something of the kind and until I fail I'm not going to worry, or let you." He glanced at the track field. "I'd better go back. I hear we'll be seeing you this afternoon." With a twinkle of mischief in his eyes he dashed away, returning to the meet.

Shu-lan joined the other teachers. They were all enjoying being free from duties. Occasionally one of her fifth graders, having won a place, came by, hoping for the praise her teacher was sure to give. Before eleven o'clock Miss Fu stood up.

"Come on, Shu-lan, let's go back to school. There'll be lots more this afternoon."

Shu-lan started to stroll back with her toward their rooms. As soon as they had left the crowd a little distance it became evident that Miss Fu had sought a chance for private conversation.

"Do you remember that I took away from you the letter from the New Bridge church, the one informing you they had dropped your name?"

"Yes. You said you wanted it, and my keeping it wouldn't have helped me feel any better." Shu-lan wondered what Miss Fu had in mind.

"Perhaps you didn't realize that I'm a member of the executive committee of the church here. At our meeting the other day I showed them that letter and explained what your awful crime had been —"

" Oh, Miss Fu, how could you? I don't want everybody to know all that! "

" They'll find out soon enough. You can't keep such a thing secret. But as I was telling you, the letter admitted you had been a good member there for five years and our committee decided that was sufficient ground for our accepting you into membership here. We don't agree that their reason for putting you out was a just one, so we have voted to receive you as a member here, a week from tomorrow."

Shu-lan walked along in silence.

" I knew you'd never do anything about it. You'd be afraid it was an attempt to justify yourself, but you don't mind my having taken the matter up, do you? "

" But — to have it said right out in church — " Shu-lan demurred.

" Of course they won't say anything in public except that you were coming from the New Bridge church with a letter which has been accepted by the executive committee. The congregation won't know what kind of letter it was! The facts have been told only among our committee members. They all understand, and approve too."

Shu-lan's eyes were full of tears. " You don't know how hard it was — How can I thank you? "

" You don't need to thank me. I didn't do anything but bring an injustice to light. It isn't as though you were a stranger. They didn't vote as they did on my recommendation but because of what they knew of you. You're too modest." She squeezed Shu-lan's hand. " But I love you for it."

All day Miss Shang had been on duty at the track meet, in charge of the contestants from Pilgrim Girls' School. At the last possible moment she dashed home and changed hurriedly into her prettiest dress to be ready to help give

out the prizes. Half an hour later she and Shu-lan were back in the crowd at the athletic field. Miss Shang was intent on being there for the high-school girls' relay, the next to the last event on the program. She was tired and flustered. Shu-lan had spent the afternoon in cool comfort in her room at Court Eleven. In leisure she had put on her yellow gown. If she was flustered too, it was for a different reason. The two teachers arrived just in time. The girls were taking their places for the relay. Many of the younger spectators had already gone home tired. Others had been away from the grounds for an hour or two but had now returned for the final events. No one paid any attention to their going or coming. There still had been hundreds of boys and girls watching every contest. The place hummed with voices and looked gay with color and movement. Shu-lan hurried after Miss Shang toward a place near the starting point, but fell behind when her companion edged her way through the crowd of students by the track. Shu-lan could guess a little of how much this race meant to Miss Shang. She had trained the girls for weeks. No wonder that when the time came for the race she was so tense.

Shu-lan, alone, went up to a higher level of the low grandstand, where she could see all the field. The Pilgrim girls, being all in junior middle school, were at a disadvantage against the Vocational School girls who were of both junior and senior grades, but the teams were closely enough matched so that the race was an exciting one. There was a chance for Pilgrim to win today. Shu-lan shouted with the students and then watched breathlessly for the last few moments, still hoping, but the girl from the other school came in ahead.

One race only remained, the boys' relay. In this, Pilgrim boys were considered to have the better team. These were Mr. Li's students. Shu-lan thought of him more than

of the boys as they tore around the track, gaining steadily on Vocational until they won by a wide margin. The crowd relaxed, and prepared to cheer the victors as they received their prizes.

Shu-lan, looking down into the crowd of girls near the track, tried to locate Miss Shang. She did not see Mr. Li coming until suddenly he was standing beside her. She smiled up at him.

"On Sunday you wore a yellow rose. Today you look like one," he said as quietly as if his thoughts had spoken themselves without his knowledge.

So he had noticed her. Even after seeing Miss Kung and her friends he had approved of Chien Shu-lan! She could not think of anything to say. But how stupid he must think her, never sensible, always stammering and blushing! She darted another glance at his face. She had to see what he was thinking. Having seen, she was less capable of speech than before. There was that look in his eyes again —

A few minutes later they found Miss Shang searching for Shu-lan and together the three mounted the steps to the pavilion. Second Brother, seated there among the secretaries, grinned slyly at his sister. Now he would have another excuse for teasing. What would the women of Lucky Inn Village say if they could see her publicly escorted by a young man?

A busy half hour followed. As the names were announced through the loud-speaker, the two teachers handed out as prizes little medals with bits of blue, red, or yellow ribbon to the boys and girls, big and little, who had won them. When Shu-lan finally went home she took something not so tangible as a prize, but it made her just as happy.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE NEXT TIME SHU-LAN SAW SECOND Brother was, strangely enough, at church. It was the Sunday she was accepted as a member at Tunghsien by letter from the New Bridge church. There were nearly twenty being received into membership, so Shu-lan congratulated herself that no one would notice her. It was comforting to be accepted again as one of a group of Christians. After the service she was surprised that so many women spoke to her. If they knew the facts, would they be so cordial? Or did they know them, as Miss Fu had said they would, and knowing them, approve? She wondered, even while her heart was warmed by their friendliness.

When she came out of the door, she was even more surprised to see Second Brother and just behind him a group of fifteen or twenty of the older Pilgrim boys. Her face lighted up when she spoke to him.

"I'm surely glad to see you at church," she said. "I thought you never came."

"That's right, I don't," Second Brother answered, "or rather, I haven't been. But—well, as a matter of fact these fellows and I heard about this business of your membership, and we all decided we'd come today. I promised to introduce them to my sister."

One of the boys, looking her straight in the eye and frowning with seriousness, showed he had prepared be-

forehand what to say. "You see, it is important. This church today has had the courage publicly to right a wrong, so we want to show our approval of what we judge to be praiseworthy. We are not Christians but we are glad to come to a church like this."

"But mostly it's you we approve of," another boy spoke up.

"We have a secret brotherhood. One of the things we have promised each other is not to marry until we're twenty-five," another explained. "That's a reform China needs."

The serious one spoke again. "That's the other part of the reason we came today. We wanted to tell you that we honor you for breaking an unsuitable engagement. And most of the boys at Pilgrim feel the same way as we do."

"Most of the —" Shu-lan gasped, "do 'most of the boys at Pilgrim' know about it? How terrible! How can I endure such notoriety?"

"They'll hear of it before the day is over," one of the boys said cheerfully, "and as for enduring the reputation you'll have, I wouldn't suppose being a heroine would be hard to endure."

To have them all talking about her! All her life it had been dinned into her ears that being talked about by men was one of the most disgraceful things that could happen to a young woman. She hung her head.

Second Brother understood. "Don't be old-fashioned, sister," he said sympathetically. "We consider you a leader of the new era."

She looked at him, the better to judge his real opinion, and then at the other boys. There could be no doubt about it. On their faces was respect and even admiration. It was all a mistake. She was no strong-minded social reformer setting new standards for Chinese women. She had not once thought of such a thing.

"*Pu kan tang!*" she exclaimed. "I'm altogether unworthy of this praise. I've only been trying in my own situation to find a way out which would seem right to me. Even so, I haven't always been sure I wasn't selfish. Certainly I've never had the least wish to be the one to decide what others should do." She smiled diffidently. "I've had a hard enough time handling my own affairs."

The serious boy spoke again. "Your lack of conceit does not affect the original proposition. We boys have thought about and discussed these topics a great deal. China's advancement depends on people who have the courage to do the right thing regardless of the backward pull of tradition." He bowed ceremoniously. "We continue to approve of you as a woman with the spirit of New China."

Apparently the other boys thought this summed it up. They all bowed, and Shu-lan, bowing in return, could think of no way to refute their astonishing, though mistaken, opinion. It would have made her feel more gratified if she could have believed she deserved it, even a little. It never occurred to her that she was the one who was mistaken while her brother and his friends were right in recognizing as significant a genuine example of what they were arguing theoretically.

Walking home with Second Brother, she asked about the sober boy.

"That's Wang Tung-min," she was told. "His home's here in Tunghsien but he lives at school. He's a year younger than I and a year behind me in school but we're great friends. He thinks and thinks, especially about China. He's about the most patriotic fellow at Pilgrim."

"I thought he seemed very much in earnest."

"You remember what one of the boys said about not being married until we're twenty-five. Well, Tung-min is the only one of our crowd who's engaged, and it's an

awfully sore point with him. He considers himself a coward because he can't bring himself to fight his family strenuously enough to make them break it off. It's one of those baby engagements like yours, and the best he's been able to do is to make a compromise with his folks. They've agreed he doesn't have to marry until he's twenty-five."

"Where's the girl to be all that time?"

"Oh, she's in school somewhere. That's one thing he insisted on. He said she had to have a modern education, but he doesn't know where she is." Second Brother shook his head. "Poor Tung-min! I'm sure now he's seen you break an engagement he'll be more restless than ever."

"I'm sorry," Shu-lan murmured. She did not wish to make his trouble harder to bear. "I'm not sure I think that every early engagement ought to be broken, just because it was made early. Don't you boys think it could be satisfactory sometimes?"

"It's the principle of the thing that makes us mad," Second Brother said stubbornly. "It's not right for parents to settle such an important matter without giving the young people a chance to express an opinion."

Shu-lan would not argue that proposition with him. Theory about marriage in general had not been a factor in her own decisions. She dropped the subject.

The next morning, when Shu-lan stood before grade five, she found the atmosphere electric with excitement. Eyes danced, and watched with clear youthful appraisal every expression on the teacher's face. Not only "most of the boys at Pilgrim," but all the girls at Pilgrim knew the story of the broken engagement.

Shu-lan gave no sign of seeing or hearing or feeling anything unusual. As calmly as on other days she explained arithmetic and listened to reading. But at recess, to escape for a few minutes from the strain, she sought the office. She had thought of Miss Fu as a refuge. She had

forgotten that the room would be full of teachers drinking tea and they would have none of the reticence of the students.

"Why didn't you tell us?" someone shouted.

"Do you know any more secrets?"

"Well, we have one famous person at Pilgrim anyway!"

Shu-lan's hand trembled as she reached for a cup and poured herself some tea. She accepted their banter with a stiff little smile. She could not think of clever answers.

"I'm ashamed to have everybody talking about me," she said at last timidly. With the teachers she had not the composure which had carried her serenely through the children's scrutiny.

"Silly! Ashamed of what?" someone took her up, but they had no desire to bait her. The topic under discussion immediately broadened: engagements—early or late, long or short, modern or old-fashioned. Everyone had an opinion and expressed it. To her relief, Shu-lan no longer held the center of the stage.

That night, going to sleep to the tune of the "tap—tap—tap—tap—" of the night watchmen's rattles, Shu-lan went over the last two days. Already during the afternoon session she thought her students had begun to lose their abnormal interest in her affairs. Miss Pan had called after school, as might have been expected, but she had not been hard to manage. After all, it was only fair to a friend to let her know some of one's secrets. "Tap—tap—tap—tap—" But there were pleasant thoughts Miss Pan did not know. There was the memory of an approving look in eyes whose approval Shu-lan longed for. "Tap—tap—tap—tap—" She had fallen asleep.

The next morning her judgment of grade five was vindicated. Everything appeared to be as it had always been.

Monkey popped up in her place. "Miss Chien, is it true what my big brother says? He says American frogs talk English. He says they don't say 'gwer-gwah, gwer-gwah.' And he says American dogs don't say 'wong-wong' nor the sheep 'merrrrr.' He say they all speak English!" Monkey's eyes were big, but it was always a little difficult to tell when she was in earnest.

Shu-lan looked over the class. It was evidently a new idea to them all, not something they had concocted for bothering the teacher. She explained what Monkey's brother had meant, and that he was only teasing. The girls found it very amusing. Their teacher was glad their attention had been diverted from her to the new and exciting occupation of practicing "bowwow" and "baa" and "chug-arum" so they could imitate American dogs, sheep, and frogs "speaking English."

At noon her father and brother unexpectedly called. They were in a great hurry. Mr. Chien gave no sign that he had ever been angry with his daughter, but Big Brother's grin was eloquent. He did the talking.

"We have come to the Rural Service Center to buy corn to plant for the autumn harvest as soon as our wheat is on the threshing floor."

"Is the wheat crop going to be good?" Shu-lan asked her father.

"Eleven parts good," he reported happily. He meant that it was even a tenth better than a bumper crop. Now if the summer rains blessed the corn without bringing a flood! Shu-lan's thoughts ran ahead to the next harvest. She was thinking of Second Brother and his university bills as much as of the folks at home. Shu-lan asked about the other members of the family. There was nothing to report but Big Brother gave her an item just as interesting.

"The Wus have a daughter-in-law," he reported with

another grin. "Carter Sung managed it for them in time so the old lady doesn't have to do any housework, after all."

"Poor girl!" Shu-lan said with evident relief. "I can't help feeling sorry for her even while I'm glad to hear the news. You know, I haven't been able to lose the uneasiness I've felt about young Wu — that he might arrive at school some day and start a rumpus before all the students, trying to make me pay him more money, claiming he hadn't been consulted, or something."

"Oh, no," Big Brother said calmly, "he couldn't. He signed that paper you have. He doesn't care so long as he gets a wife and his mother's satisfied. Besides, he knows 'you can't strip two hides off one cow.'"

"Just the same, I'm relieved to hear that he's married."

The call was brief but that did not matter. The word they had brought had been good. Most important of all was the fact that her father had forgiven her.

Late one afternoon Shu-lan had answered the last question and bowed good-by to the last girl. She was gathering up her notebooks when she caught a glimpse of Ricksha Rider peeking in at the door. Seeing that her teacher was alone she hurried in, stopped in the middle of the aisle to bow deeply, and then came on to the desk.

"Miss Chien, I have to talk to you," she began, speaking fast as if the words were bottled up inside her.

Shu-lan sat down at her desk and pointed to the nearest seat. "What about?" she asked kindly.

The queer pale girl was no longer so queer nor so pale. Playing out-of-doors every day and eating with the crowd of girls at school a hearty noon meal of common corn bread and Chinese cabbage, instead of the finer food she was accustomed to at home, had filled her out and given her cheeks some of the ruddy color of a country child.

Her large eyes were becoming strikingly beautiful. Besides, she had begun to have a place among her classmates. She had a chum. She and Auntie might seem an odd combination. Certainly they were financially at the opposite extremes of the class. Ricksha Rider, old for her years, felt at home with Auntie's maturity, and the older girl's kind heart had from the first appreciated the other's good qualities. Shu-lan had observed the friendship with satisfaction. Now as she waited for Ricksha Rider's reply to her question, some of the sympathy she had always felt was in her look.

"You don't know it, but I've been engaged to be married ever since I was a baby, just like you, and I want to break my engagement and be a schoolteacher, just like you." The girl's eyes filled with tears. "You must know how I feel."

Shu-lan answered slowly and quietly. "Yes, I suppose I can guess pretty well." In breaking her engagement to young Wu she had not considered what it might mean to other young people. Certainly she had never thought of there being any connection with Ricksha Rider. Hints that had come out through the weeks indicated that the girl's home was one of ample wealth but little love. Shu-lan, in spite of her inexperience, had unconsciously given her thoughtful pupil a new idea of freedom for the individual woman and of the attractiveness of schoolteaching as a career. Ricksha Rider's reaction arose not only from her having been impressed by the similarity between her circumstances and those of her pretty teacher, but also because there was a winsomeness in Shu-lan's personality which was so unfamiliar to the girl that it opened new doors of thought. Shu-lan did not know that to her students her smile was already as sweet and comforting as Miss Fu's had ever been to her. She was touched and humbled by the naïve admiration in the wish to be "just like

you." She thought a moment. "Tell me, who's the boy? Do you know him?" she asked.

"I've never seen him but I know his name." The girl's face flushed. How well Shu-lan knew how hard it was to tell such things! "He's a Pilgrim boy and his name is Wang Tung-min."

"Wang Tung-min!" Shu-lan exclaimed. "Why! I know him. He's a friend of my brother's." The boy's sober face was vivid in her memory. "I was talking to him just this last Sunday!"

"You know him?" Ricksha Rider cried. "And you — and you — like him?" Her face was not pale at all now but rosy with embarrassment mingled with surprise.

Shu-lan recalled what Second Brother had said — Wang Tung-min wanted to break the engagement; he had reluctantly agreed to marry the girl after seven years; she was a student somewhere. She would not tell all of it to Ricksha Rider.

"My brother told me that Wang Tung-min does not wish to be married until he's twenty-five. Did you know that? That's seven years from now." She calculated rapidly on her fingers. "You can finish senior middle school, and if we manage well, perhaps you and this young man can be the best of friends by then."

Ricksha Rider was evidently startled by this revolutionary suggestion. "You mean we could see each other and talk to each other?"

"And perhaps learn to like each other," Shu-lan added calmly. "I shouldn't be a bit surprised. You see I don't think that just because an engagement was made early it must necessarily be broken if that's the only objection to it, any more than I think it ought to be kept just because it's been made a long time. You and Wang Tung-min, when you are acquainted, may find you have enough in common so that you will want to be married after

you've had some more education. One thing is certain, you have plenty of time; so don't be unhappy about it now, and maybe you'll never need to be."

Ricksha Rider stood up to go. Her intelligent eyes shone with the light of a new idea. "You've truly helped me to rest my heart," she said quietly, and bowed to her teacher.

Shu-lan watching her go, resolved that she would ask Second Brother to talk to Wang Tung-min, and meanwhile she would do her best to make Ricksha Rider so attractive that he would consider himself lucky to be engaged to her.

In the afternoons the sun was hot, but it was too late in the term for anyone to indulge in lazy classwork. Teacher and pupils in grade five worked hard, but they were thankful to reach the end of the day. The room was not so hot as the sunshine out-of-doors. They were in no hurry to start home. With weary unconcern they put their desks in order.

One day after school, into the room full of girls thus occupied, Clockface came running officiously. "Miss Fu says to come, quick. I was in the office and there's a pretty lady talking to her and she wants to see you."

Shu-lan gave her hair a pat or two, picked up her pile of books and papers and made her way to the office.

The visitor was indeed a "pretty lady," as Clockface had announced, but Shu-lan saw a great deal more than that even in the first glance — that she was taller and a little older than Miss Fu, and more than her equal in dignity and poise.

"This is Miss Li, an old friend of mine," Miss Fu was saying. "She's the older sister of Mr. Li who's an athletic director over at the boys' school."

Mrs. Hu had said, Shu-lan remembered, that Mr. Li's

sister was head nurse in a Tientsin hospital, too busy to come to Tunghsien, but that she might be expected to help her brother choose a wife.

"I just came for the day," Miss Li added, "on some important business for my brother and took this opportunity for a little chat with Miss Fu." Miss Li's low voice and pleasing manner were like her brother's but Shu-lan failed to notice the fact, she was so intent on what Miss Li had said. "Important business!" What could be more important than telling him about a girl she had chosen to become his wife? Shu-lan was not pleased with the thought that Mr. Li would soon marry.

"The trains must be uncomfortable in such hot weather," she remarked, making casual conversation.

"I came this morning on the earliest one and I'll go back on a late one in the evening. They're really not bad if one can do that." Miss Li's glance was direct but friendly. Shu-lan could not help liking her. But why had she been called to the office?

"Miss Li has heard of the play your students gave and asked me if you had written it down," Miss Fu said.

"My brother told me about it," Miss Li explained, "and I thought from his description that it would be just the thing for my student nurses to give; that is, if you have an extra copy."

Shu-lan thought for a moment. "We'd consider it a great compliment to have you use it, of course, but — you're likely to be disappointed." Miss Li's student nurses were middle-school graduates. Surely they would scorn the fifth-grade play. "You will probably think it childish."

"I'll risk that. We have so little practice in dramatics that we don't want anything hard."

"You're more than welcome to it. It's over at my room. I'll run and get it," Shu-lan offered.

"I'll just go with you, if I may," Miss Li suggested,

"and then you won't need to come back. I was leaving anyway." She said good-by to Miss Fu and walked along with Shu-lan, asking about her work at Pilgrim and apparently interested in everything she heard and saw. She really was charming, Shu-lan decided, and who could blame her for wanting to assure her younger brother's future happiness?

Miss Li looked over Court Eleven, commenting on how sensible it was to have young girls in quarters so similar to their homes instead of crowded into huge Western-style dormitories. Shu-lan had never thought much about it. To her, sleeping in brick beds like those at home had always been just a part of student life at Pilgrim, in the same way as the big three-storied, furnace-heated dormitory with wooden beds had been a part of the senior middle school she had attended in Peking. She found herself talking freely to Miss Li. She might be the head of a training school for nurses and more dignified even than Miss Fu but she inspired no fear when one met her as a friend.

"I'm sorry the manuscript is so rumpled," Shu-lan apologized, trying to smooth its dog-eared corners.

"Have you only this one copy?" Miss Li asked. "I wouldn't have asked to borrow your only one, but I'll send it right back. We have several convalescent students who can copy it for me."

"If you didn't return it," Shu-lan said softly, "it would be all right. It would be a small favor to balance against a very great one. Didn't you know your brother went and brought mine back after he had been kidnaped by bandits? We could never repay that."

Afterward, going over Miss Li's visit, Shu-lan had two conflicting thoughts. She did not want Miss Li to choose a wife for her brother, but Shu-lan seldom met a new acquaintance she had liked so well. If he was to marry soon,

as Mrs. Hu had said she thought likely, his sister appeared indeed to be one whose judgment would be worth trusting. At the moment when she had first known that this was Mr. Li's older sister, she jumped to the conclusion that Miss Li must have come to tell her brother that she had found a girl in Tientsin for him. Yet Shu-lan felt sure he would not marry even a girl of his sister's choice "sight unseen" as Mrs. Hu had suggested. Sometime before the engagement was settled he would take a trip to Tientsin.

Obviously, the purpose of Miss Li's visit to Tunghsien had no connection with Chien Shu-lan's affairs. But many times, in the days that followed, she found her hands were doubled into tight little fists while in her heart a voice said fiercely, "I don't want him to marry a girl in Tientsin."



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LARLY WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, SHU-LAN WAS debating with herself whether to call on Mrs. Hu. Just then she received a note from the very person she was thinking about, inviting her to tea on Saturday afternoon at three thirty and asking her to wear the yellow dress she had worn at the track meet. Shu-lan was puzzled, but arrived at a conclusion which satisfied her.

"She's giving a tea party and plans to have me help her serve, so she wants me to match the curtains and cushions."

During the following days it seemed a bit strange that she did not hear any of the other teachers mention being invited to tea at Mrs. Hu's. Shu-lan concluded that the guests would be faculty wives from the boys' school.

So on Saturday afternoon, Shu-lan, dressed once more in her yellow voile, surveyed as much as she could see of herself in her tiny mirror. What she saw was not bad looking. That was the girl — she looked at her — to whom Mr. Li had said, well, several things.

At the appointed time she entered the Hu courtyard and was greeted cordially by her hostess. The foliage of the great walnut tree was richly green and its shade filled the court with coolness. Under it, Sunbeam's play pen with its toys stood empty.

"I suppose it's still naptime," Shu-lan remarked.

"That's one reason I asked you to come so early," Mrs. Hu answered, as the two entered the living room. On the

desk and table were cool bouquets of delicate blue Manchurian iris. The yellow-and-brown room was as freshly attractive to Shu-lan as it had been the first time she had seen it. She was surprised to find no other guests. Mrs. Hu led her at once to the table.

"We'll have our tea before Sunbeam wakes up," she explained. "I find her a bit distracting."

Mrs. Hu served several varieties of little cakes bought at a pastry shop in the city but she had also made a new kind of cooky from a foreign recipe. Shu-lan complimented her that they were tastier than the ones from the shop. "Sunbeam prefers these too," Mrs. Hu remarked.

Conversation between them was always easy. Shu-lan reported her father's visit. She told about Ricksha Rider and Wang Tung-min. Perhaps Mrs. Hu could help some with their problem. Shu-lan found that a number of other incidents worth mentioning had happened since the last time they had talked together. But there was one to which she did not refer. Mrs. Hu doubtless knew of Miss Li's visit. Let her speak of it. All the time Shu-lan kept wondering a little why Mrs. Hu had taken the trouble to ask her to wear her yellow voile. Finally she decided that the simplest explanation must be correct: Mrs. Hu must have liked it and wanted to see her with it on again. She would think no more about it.

But when, after a while, the front gate opened and she heard a man's step coming up the walk, Shu-lan was glad she was wearing the yellow dress. Surely the step was Mr. Li's! He had not yet made that trip to Tientsin. Perhaps he was waiting for school to be out.

He was in the gray flannel suit she had thought made him look more handsome than the men of the Kung family. Without a word about Sunbeam he came and sat down at the table as naturally as if he had been expected. Once, during the lively talk that followed, the random thought

occurred to Shu-lan that possibly Mr. Li had in fact been invited. It was enough that he was there, as charming as ever, though most of his remarks were addressed to his hostess. After his arrival, Mrs. Hu became more vivacious than Shu-lan had ever seen her before. The conversation was gay and animated.

It was therefore not surprising that in a few minutes shouts from Sunbeam in the next room asked for companionship. As soon as there was a lull in the talk, Mrs. Hu excused herself to go to the baby. The others rose from the table with her.

Shu-lan walked slowly across to a big cushioned chair beside the desk and sat down. Mr. Li sat near her and began to straighten some Chinese books on the small carved table next to his chair. Shu-lan tried to think of something to talk about as they waited for their hostess. Through the open doorway she watched Mrs. Hu take the baby out by another door, put her into the play pen in the yard and disappear into the kitchen.

"That's funny," she remarked with a little giggle, "Mrs. Hu seems to be deserting us."

For the first time since Mrs. Hu had left, Mr. Li looked directly at Shu-lan. She thought his face showed that he too was a little embarrassed, but his eyes were steady.

"I'd better confess, I asked her to," he said. At this she suddenly avoided his gaze. "Otherwise I don't know when or where there would ever be a chance to talk to you, alone." His voice was low and gentle, but contained a suggestion of tension.

Shu-lan was watching her fingers folding and refolding her handkerchief on her lap.

"I know that what I am doing breaks old Chinese custom, but I'll not worry about that, unless it offends you. I hope you will understand me, that it is because I esteem you so highly I want to ask you myself to be my wife.

I don't want even my best friends to come between us in the discussion of the most important matter we two could ever talk about." He paused a moment, still watching her intently.

Her head bent over farther and farther. She no longer folded her handkerchief. She clenched it tightly in her hand.

"I don't want to startle you with sophisticated modern ways, yet—I must tell you—you may think we don't know each other very well, but I know you well enough to feel we would be happy together. Old-fashioned people would be horrified at what I am going to say—but just the same, I'll say it—I love you."

Shu-lan sat motionless. It was an undreamed-of situation. Mr. Li had actually chosen her, Chien Shu-lan! Of all the things that could happen was there any more wonderful than this? But her debt! She was entangled in it, not free to accept this proffered happiness. There was such a lump in her throat that she could not speak. She could feel his look but tears would have blurred her vision, had she dared return it. How could she refuse him? But the debt!

"I can't," she whispered with stiff lips. That debt had freed her from young Wu. To think that it should become the obstacle preventing what she now knew she wanted most of all in the world! She could not bear his gaze any longer. She rose and stood by the desk pretending to rearrange the flowers as an excuse for turning her back on him. But her fingers trembled so that she gave it up and stood, one hand clasped in the other. Second Brother and his friends had praised her as a woman emancipated from old customs. But breaking with the old left her with no pattern for dealing with the new. An American girl, surprised by a proposal of marriage, is nevertheless well acquainted with accepted procedure. Shu-lan

in this new situation, had no tradition to follow. In this crisis she could only act instinctively with hardly more poise than an old-fashioned girl. Mr. Li, understanding how disturbingly new even the thought of his direct proposal was, realized he must not expect her to say much.

After a moment he spoke quietly. "You — can't? Do you mean that having set your heart on teaching school there is no room for marriage in your plans? I remember Mrs. Hu told me your choice of a career. Is that it?"

Shu-lan only shook her head. She could not speak. He must never know what dawned so clearly upon her now, that much as she liked her work, she would drop it in an instant without a regret if she could accept what he offered her. She believed what he had said. In the atmosphere of such a home as Mrs. Hu's she was sure they could be very happy together.

But he was asking another question, and was speaking more diffidently. "Do you mean you can't because you're reluctant to take care of another woman's baby?"

At the shock of that undeserved suspicion Shu-lan turned abruptly and regardless of her tear-stained face looked at him. "Sunbeam?" she cried, "I love her!" But seeing his troubled gaze she longed to confess what it was impossible to say, that she loved him more. Her knees were shaking. She sat down again. Though she had dreamed of Mr. Li's smiles and prized his approval, she had supposed he would marry some beautiful girl, possibly a rich one, or else someone as talented as Miss Kung. Such surely, she had thought, would be the girl his sister would choose for him. What Shu-lan herself had treasured was the hope that he liked her. She was not free even to think about marriage until her debt was paid.

He rose now and stood in front of her. "I've no right to question you, but I — I confess I've been hoping for

this so hard — I just have to know. Do you mean it's because you don't like me well enough?"

"I didn't say that!"

He stood looking down at her, then turned and started to walk across the room. Having gone only a few steps he turned back again and in a puzzled voice said as though asking himself, "Then what is the reason?"

Shu-lan scarcely breathed. What if, not understanding, he should leave her? She must not let him go! How could she ever live now without him? The years of teaching which a few weeks ago had stretched out so invitingly before her had lost every bit of their attractiveness. Yet weighed down by the awful burden of that debt, she could not even answer his question. Suddenly she burst into tears.

"I owe some money and — and so I can't marry anybody." She had not intended to tell him. She crushed the little ball of her handkerchief against her lips to keep them still. But the truth was out.

In two long strides Mr. Li was again standing before her, his voice showing his relief. "If that's all it is, it surely can be easily fixed."

Tears rolled down Shu-lan's cheeks. It was not easy at all. Two years stretched ahead like half a lifetime. "It'll take a long time to pay it," she sobbed.

His voice was more gentle than before. "I don't know how much you owe, but don't suppose for one minute that I wouldn't be eager to settle such an account for you, no matter how big it is."

"You pay it?" she gasped.

"Of course." His tone had the matter-of-fact self-reliance of a man who is used to financial independence. But Shu-lan could not dismiss her debt so lightly. She had carried that burden without self-pity because it was the only means by which she could be free of her parents'

promise to young Wu. Yet it was so big — the weight so heavy!

"But it's nearly two hundred and fifty dollars," she whispered. "I've paid only a little on it."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars," he repeated sympathetically. "Yes, I can see why it's been a heavy burden to you. I can take care of it more easily."

How could he be so nonchalant about it? Then it occurred to her that he had been used to such responsibilities. He was assuming this debt, large as it was, without making any more ado than he might have made about the cost of a new pair of shoes for Sunbeam. She was not used to having her obligations carried by someone else.

"But — that doesn't seem right." Her voice was only a whisper. "It's all my own affair. I'll work for it, only —"

"Please don't think any more about it," he urged. "Let it be my affair now."

"How can I stop thinking about it? I've thought about nothing else for months. If I could think it was right to let you —"

"Why shouldn't I —" he paused and then added with feeling, "for you?"

What arguments had failed to do these two words accomplished for him. They repeated what he had broken tradition to tell her — that he loved her and wanted her for his wife. He had been trying to make her see that his love made her affairs — even this heavy obligation of hers — his too. Suddenly she was surprised to find that in her heart there was no burden. It was gone. Joy was in its place, and love. She sat up straight and looked through her tears at his face, bent sympathetically above her.

"Then let me ask you again," he was saying, "the question that is important: Are you sure that debt is the only thing that's in the way?"

If she could only tell him how sure she was! She was suddenly ashamed to have him see her tears. Her eyes must be red and swollen. She rose and moved away from him, looking out into the shady courtyard. Her heart began to dance. Her poise was returning. A new light came into her eyes. "How can I decide such a matter?" she murmured with old-fashioned maidenly propriety.

He came over to the doorway and stood beside her, studying her expression. His voice was confident. "You've decided enough before," he reminded her in a less serious tone, "you can decide this too."

But she had already decided it. She looked up into his eyes and smiled. In his answering look she found all she had seen there before — the understanding and the happiness and the tenderness which she had never been able to define.

For a long moment they stood there not noticing that Sunbeam was hanging onto the side of her play pen, jumping and shouting to them. Then Mr. Li ran out, picked her up, and brought her in. He was boyish in showing that he wanted someone to rejoice with him. He hugged the baby. "Sunbeam, do you know how happy we are?"

Sunbeam was always exuberant, especially when she had the promise of play. She crowed and jumped in her father's arms as enthusiastically as he could have wished. Yet nothing she could do could distract his attention from Shu-lan.

Suddenly with one of the unpredictable notions of childhood, holding out her hands, she gave a great lunge toward Shu-lan. As she grabbed the baby, she found that her hands were again caught in Mr. Li's strong ones. Laughing and blushing with the memory of an earlier occasion, she tried halfheartedly to pull away, but he was holding her tight, while together they held Sunbeam.

Shu-lan looked up into his face to find him watching her with the merriest twinkle she had ever seen.

He freed her when Mrs. Hu, coming out of the kitchen and hearing Sunbeam, walked on into the living room. "All through talking?" she inquired with a suggestion of impishness, but she could see they were. "I'm glad I was in the secret even if he wouldn't let anyone act as go-between."

Mr. Li was openly admiring Shu-lan, slender and graceful in her yellow gown, but too shy in her new happiness to answer Mrs. Hu. She came and squeezed Shu-lan's hand. "Don't mind me," she said. "I'd have been heart-broken if you two hadn't agreed. I'm sure you're going to be very, very happy, and Sunbeam too." She gave the baby a pat and smiled at Mr. Li.

"But we won't tell anyone," Shu-lan began in a panic.

Mrs. Hu laughed. "I never saw such a girl for secrets!" she exclaimed, and then added, "But it's true, you had better keep this one until school's out."

"Except Second Brother!" Shu-lan amended, then looking appealingly at Mr. Li, "You tell him," she begged.

He smiled assent.

Shu-lan was dazed with her happiness. As she returned to Court Eleven, as she walked in the streets or courtyards, as she stood before the fifth grade, she was no longer the commonplace girl she had always felt herself. She was someone else whom she had scarcely known. From the oriole's song outside her window every morning to the gorgeous sunsets which ended the days, all her hours were full of beauty. Her secret shone from her face. That something extraordinary had happened, and that it was altogether lovely could have been discerned easily if anyone had taken time to look at her. But these were the busiest days of the school year. Reviews, final examinations, practicing for commencement, farewell parties, farewell visits,

and packing entirely filled the attention of both teachers and pupils.

Shu-lan, even while her heart sang for the future, went through the final activities of the semester with a mild regret that for her it was to be the last time. If the fifth grade ever saw a wistful glance, they could explain it easily. They were sure their Miss Chien would never again find so clever and jolly a class as theirs.

Within the week after Shu-lan had promised to marry Mr. Li she met Miss Fu in the yard at school. Miss Fu smiled as she said enthusiastically: "Now I know another secret of yours. Mr. Li came and paid your loan but nobody else learned anything about it. I think you're a lucky girl and he's a very lucky man."

Shu-lan was far from calm, but her gratitude conquered her shyness. "I don't forget that I owe my happiness to you. Otherwise for these last two months I'd have been out at Lucky Inn Village cooking for the Wus."

"It's nice of you to say so. But the truth is, you were so determined, that if I hadn't helped you you'd have found someone else who would. I don't take much credit, proud as I am of what little belongs to me."

"I intended to pay the debt myself. It was worth two years' work to me. I didn't begrudge the time, until —"

"Yes, I know. Mr. Li told me you didn't want to let him pay it. I don't blame him for wishing to clear it out of the way so the wedding could be earlier. He told me he'd been living as economically as a schoolboy and so had enough for this in the bank. I think it gave him a great deal of pleasure to do it for you."

"He's awfully nice," Shu-lan confided. She could not say what she thought, that there was probably not a nicer man in the world. It might sound a little too much like boasting.

"I know he is. He must be — he looks and acts so much

like his sister whom I've known ever since we were school-mates. When's the wedding to be? "

" We spoke of August, before school opens."

" Why not right away? " Miss Fu wondered.

" Maybe it's so I can get used to the idea," Shu-lan murmured. She did not know any good reason. " In the fall I'm afraid I'll be lonesome for school."

Miss Fu laughed merrily. " I notice that most married women have a pretty good time without school," she answered, and then in parting added, " I'm very happy for you."

As soon as the girls' school was out, Shu-lan spent most of her time with Mrs. Hu. At the boys' school which closed a little later the regular schedule was over and a week's final examinations were in progress. Mr. Li, free from athletics, opened and cleaned the three-room building on the west side of the court, which he had not used since winter. Shu-lan helping Mrs. Hu with the housework or with the care of Sunbeam, was always conscious of his presence whenever he was there. Many times during the day they would rest and chat, sitting in the yellow cushioned chairs by Sunbeam's play pen under the walnut tree. After two or three days she began to be less embarrassed in the new relationship.

Western lovers, seeing between the two no manifestations of affection such as are customary with them, might have been misled into thinking that they lacked feeling or failed to express it at all. Mr. Li was thoroughly modern in both thought and practice but he had never become foreignized to the extent of thinking of kissing his fiancée. He practically never touched even her hand. Their quiet companionship in the same courtyard, their freedom to talk together as long as they liked with no other chaperonage than Mrs. Hu's presence somewhere about the house,

and especially the unlimited opportunity to express by looks and glances their love for each other — these were already such a break with traditional propriety, as Shu-lan had been taught it, that she was forever dizzy with the speed she seemed to be traveling.

Mr. and Mrs. Hu, also modern to the extent of openly yearning for many American things and ways, were nevertheless quiet and decorous with each other and equally so toward Shu-lan and Mr. Li. They did not find it necessary to tease their friends. Shu-lan, at first distressfully self-conscious, was not subjected to boisterous horseplay. She was allowed to adjust gradually to the ever-thrilling knowledge that she and Mr. Li belonged together. She was startled the first time she realized she had used the familiar form of the word for “you” when speaking to him. After that, it was often consciously a word of endearment. Earlier, Shu-lan had envied Mrs. Hu’s poise and wondered as to its source. Now, as she too grew confident and secure, she began unconsciously to exhibit the same dignity, having in her heart the same contentment.

The oriole which sang in the early morning for her at Court Eleven was only one of many birds that made their homes in the big trees of the school grounds, especially those along the moat. The days deep in June were full of the songs of birds. The noisiest were those of the Indian cuckoos of which there were several in the neighborhood. The Chinese claim that his brief but loud song proclaims *Kwang kwer hao kuo* — “single man lives well,” or more literally, “a single man gets over the days easily.”

Every day one of these cuckoos in particular kept shouting his four-note testimony as to the advantages of not assuming the burdens of matrimony. Often, when Shu-lan heard it, she smiled and planned to tease Mr. Li about it, but always as soon as she was with him it slipped out of her mind.

The early afternoons were too warm for work. After lunch, while Sunbeam slept, her elders sat in the shade and read or talked; or perhaps Mr. Hu was busy at school and Mrs. Hu took a nap, leaving the two alone.

One day Mr. Li brought out his violin and played for a while. Putting it down, he told Shu-lan something of his home in Shantung. Then after a little he mentioned Miss Li's recent visit. He explained, "You see I think a great deal of my older sister — so much that I wanted her to know you."

"You mean she came to see me?" Shu-lan was astounded. "Then the 'important business' —" When would she ever learn to guess right? "I thought she meant she came to tell you she had found a bride for you in Tientsin!"

"No, no, quite the contrary — to approve the one I had found here myself!" He laughed at Shu-lan's natural mistake.

"So she wasn't in earnest in what she said about our play," Shu-lan remarked, a little crestfallen. "She didn't really want it."

"Oh, yes, she wanted it all right," Mr. Li assured her. "Of course it was a useful topic of conversation, I'll admit. Once she had mentioned your name, Miss Fu sang your praises without any prompting. But you can see that by asking for the play my sister was sure of seeing you. You wouldn't have wanted her to say right out —" His eyes twinkled, and Shu-lan smiled too.

Both he and Mr. Hu read a great deal, including weekly and monthly magazines in English. This fact, and their wider and more varied experience often led them to talk about subjects on which Shu-lan was uninformed. She followed in thought wherever Mr. Li led, believing anything he said must be right. She would have been satisfied to be where he was even if she could not have understood a word of what he said. Sometimes she stopped lis-

tening and simply looked at him, tingling with happiness at the thought he and she belonged to each other. He could never have guessed, seeing her sitting there so demurely, that she was looking at the little brown spot on his left cheek, and wishing she might touch it with the tip of her finger —

Father and Mother Chien and Big Brother were planning to come to see Second Brother graduate on Wednesday morning. Mrs. Hu decided to invite the Chiens to dinner after the commencement exercises. She hoped the invitation might assist Shu-lan in placating her mother. A neighbor could be found to do the extra work of cooking and serving. It was Shu-lan who thought of Wang Ma and asked her to lock up Court Eleven for one day and come to help. The days dragged slowly for her now that the girls were gone. She would enjoy the party and her share of the good food.

On Wednesday Shu-lan and Wang Ma arrived early at Mrs. Hu's. The morning air was cool and fresh. As she helped to wash vegetables, Shu-lan could picture her parents on the way and being met at the station by Second Brother. Today, inevitably, she would meet her mother. Did Mrs. Chien still feel angry toward her daughter? Would she take this opportunity to pour out on Shu-lan's head the bitterness she had felt at being ridiculed by her neighbors? It had been Shu-lan's fault beyond a doubt. She might have to stand defenseless while Mr. Li and perhaps others listened to her mother's wild vituperation. Shu-lan's lips trembled. How could she endure that? She looked back at her own heartache over the Wu engagement as if it had all happened to another person. The memories belonged to another now almost forgotten era. Might her mother's anger also have cooled? Could she dare to hope that her mother would forgive her today?

Commencement was scheduled for ten o'clock. By nine

o'clock, on the shelves in Mrs. Hu's kitchen, in neat rows were plates full of chopped vegetables and meats arranged in the order in which they were to be cooked and served. The women were free until nearly dinnertime.

Shu-lan took Wang Ma's key and ran back to Court Eleven to put on the cream-colored Szechuan crepe she had worn at her own commencement a year before. She remembered how excited she had been. Today Second Brother would feel as she had felt that it was the most significant day of his life. Already, to Shu-lan, last year was unimportant. The events of the last few days had so much deeper a meaning.

She went again to the Hu courtyard to wait for Mrs. Hu, but Mr. Li met her inside the gate.

"There's time for us to take a walk and Mrs. Hu says not to bother about her. She'll come on by herself when she's ready." He held a perfect little red rose of the variety common in North China. As he started to slip the stem through the loop of the button on her shoulder, he whispered, "It's red, for my bride."

Shu-lan saw his fingers tremble. She wondered if he could feel her heart beating as though it would burst for joy.

They walked along the lower path close by the moat. It was cool under the shadows of the willows. After a little pause, Mr. Li asked the question Shu-lan had expected every day since she had been unable to answer Miss Fu.

"Why do we wait until August? Let's skip a lot of the customary getting ready, and then you won't have to spend all the hot summer sewing on a lot of things you don't really want."

It would never do for a girl to say, "I don't want to wait either." There were advantages in leaving the date for Old Hou the astrologer to determine.

"Single man lives well! Single man lives well!" a

cuckoo suddenly shouted almost above their heads.

They both laughed.

Shu-lan gave him a merry glance out of the corner of her eyes. "I've been intending to tell you there's a bird in this neighborhood that has you terribly on his mind. He's been saying that for days, and I know he means you."

"Single man lives well! Single man lives well!" the cuckoo's call came again from a little farther off.

"Hum-m-m!" Mr. Li said, "I heard him. I've been told that birds don't have many brains and I believe it. Here's one single man who doesn't live well. Couldn't you help him by changing the date to sometime toward the end of this month?"

It was a topic the girl herself was supposed to find unmentionable. Her family decided such matters. Shu-lan was learning modern ways fast. The pink of her cheeks deepened only slightly.

"Since my parents will be here today —" she began.

"That's the reason I'm asking you before they come!" he told her, and when she smiled at him in consent, he added, "You make me very happy."

"And I have a request to make of you," she said bashfully. "It's because you gave me such a marvelous gift in paying that huge debt for me. I want that to count as my betrothal gift instead of all the things that are usually sent. You've spent enough money on me without buying all those things."

He thought a minute. "All right — no red geese, nor cakes and wine, nor sets of clothing for all four seasons, nor white pillows, one with green ends and one with red ends," he grinned mischievously, "nor even yards of red satin. But don't you want jewelry? Think about it! Pairs of bracelets and rings of gold and silver, all in pairs —" She enjoyed this teasing.

"Nothing but a wedding ring."

" Oh, I can afford more than that! Remember the middleman's fee I saved by asking you myself! "

Ahead of them, by the artesian well, students were filling tin teakettles with the cold water to take back to their rooms. A group, arriving at the gushing overflow pipe were laughing and joking, and looking at Mr. Li and Shu-lan as they slowly drew near along the path from the west.

" They see us! " Shu-lan warned.

" I can't think of anyone I'd rather they saw me with," Mr. Li said grinning again, and then: " Do you care? We're going to let the news out sometime, aren't we? "

Shu-lan looked into his eyes with confidence. " I don't care," she agreed. As they moved along the walk she gave no indication that it was the first time she had ever gone for a walk with a man. " I've broken so many customs already, that being seen taking a walk with my future husband doesn't worry me," she said boldly, but the expression on her face belied her words. " Only," she added, " it's a good thing no one from Lucky Inn Village can see me."

They passed the well and reached the road which led to the boys' school. Looking back, Shu-lan turned stiff with horror. Beyond the schoolboys, following them, but along the upper path on the bank above the one where she and Mr. Li had just been, were Second Brother and her mother. They must have seen her all the time. She felt the panic of a child.

" Look! No, don't look! They'll see us! "

" Why, it's your mother and brother," Mr. Li said calmly, stepping to the side of the path to wait for them.

He wasn't afraid even of her mother! Shu-lan's breath came fast.

Mrs. Chien was stumping along on her bound feet in the agitated manner of an old hen a few minutes after the

chicken yard has been¹ frightened by a hawk soaring overhead. Beside her, Second Brother strolled with long, languid steps. Before she reached them, on her face could be seen a smile which she had obviously just fixed there. Second Brother's grin proclaimed that he had only now finished telling his mother the staggering news of his sister's engagement.

When her mother came near, Shu-lan gave her a deep ceremonious bow and Mr. Li bowed and spoke.

"You've come!" he said. "It makes the day memorable for this brilliant son of yours."

"It's entirely by the merit of his honorable teachers that the stupid boy squeezes through," Mrs. Chien answered politely.

Mr. Li, with his most charming manner, thanked her again for the bounteous hospitality he had enjoyed as her guest, asked about the morning's journey from Lucky Inn, and inquired her opinion of the school grounds and buildings Second Brother had been showing her. She in return made the most genteel comments at her command.

Shu-lan rejoiced at being ignored. How cleverly Mr. Li managed the old lady! She might not yet claim Shu-lan as her daughter, but at least she was not going to scold in public. Mr. Li was walking attentively beside her mother but Shu-lan noticed that he kept her always close beside him instead of letting her fall back with Second Brother. Eventually he introduced her name casually into the conversation. Her mother's answer was as casual. Shu-lan gasped. Was that all there was going to be to it? She had not been surprised that her taciturn father forgave her without saying anything about it. But her mother! To think that there was to be no fuss! The past was going to be forgotten without a word! It was a marvelous feeling. She was forgiven. She could even go home again to Lucky Inn if she wanted to. Mr. Li had accomplished it for her.

She peeked at his red rose she wore and from a full heart breathed a little prayer of gratitude.

Commencement was over. Second Brother's name had been read among those who had won honors. The Chien men sat eating peanuts and watermelon seeds with Mr. Li and Mr. Hu under the big walnut tree, while the last preparations were being made for dinner. Mr. Chien said nothing. With his fan stuck inside the back of his collar, he listened to the conversation of his second son and the teachers, his toothless smile ready for everyone's jokes. In her play pen was Sunbeam dressed in light-blue jacket and trousers and tiny barefoot sandals. She eyed them all silently, awed by so many strangers. Big Brother had agreed enthusiastically to Shu-lan's suggestion that Lotus Bud must have a play pen too. He kept looking at it thoughtfully. Wang Ma and Shu-lan were doing the work. They had persuaded Mrs. Hu that it was her duty to entertain Mrs. Chien. The two women sat in the pretty yellow living room, Mrs. Hu facing Sunbeam's bedroom and nearer the outside door, as was proper for the hostess. Mrs. Chien, unused to the big wicker chairs, sat perched on the edge of one, where she had a view of the room and out into the shady court. She was in high spirits, talking steadily.

Shu-lan went back and forth setting the table in the cool shade of the walnut tree. At last she caught Second Brother's eye and waved for him to come to the kitchen.

"Brother, tell me quickly, what did mother say?" she demanded. "I'm dying to hear."

"Well," he began with a grin, "there you two were, a few tens of paces ahead of us on the lower path, dawdling along. 'Who's that?' mother asked, sort of excited. I suppose you looked familiar and yet she couldn't believe it was you. 'Why, it's my sister, isn't it?' I said. I

couldn't resist saying it that way since she'd made such a fuss about claiming you weren't her daughter any more."

"You impertinent boy!" Shu-lan interposed.

"'What?' she almost screamed. 'Shu-lan?' Her face got all red and for a moment she could hardly speak. Then she sputtered out: 'Well, when a girl begins by disobeying her parents you never can tell where she'll end. Brazen girl! Walking alone with a man! Really! Who is the fellow?'"

Shu-lan was giggling. Wang Ma's mouth was hanging open while she held a ladle in mid-air. This was all taking that worthy lady completely by surprise. Preparations for dinner came to a full stop. Second Brother went on with zest.

"Then I said very calmly and pleasantly, 'Why, it's Mr. Li, isn't it?' knowing how crazy she is about him ever since she saw him at that dinner. And then I thought I might as well give her the whole thing at once, so I went on: 'And by the way, it's only a few days since they became engaged. He's going to marry sister.'"

"Oh, what did she say then? Tell me, quick!" Shu-lan cried eagerly. Second Brother stopped and shook with laughter. He knew his leisurely report was provoking Shu-lan almost to a frenzy.

"Well, I wish you could have seen her. For once mother was struck dumb. She couldn't say a word, but her face said aplenty. The anger died out of it and her eyes grew bigger and bigger. She didn't say a thing more until we had nearly caught up to you. She was too stunned, I guess. She would sort of gasp now and then, and say, 'Really—really!' the way she does, under her breath. And all the time you two loitered along in front of us."

"Of course we didn't suspect you were there."

Second Brother laughed again. "So then I said in a kind of pleading tone: 'You won't object to him as a son-

in-law will you, mother? He's really a very fine man.' " Second Brother imitated his own voice. " Then she began to smile and sort of expand, and I said, ' We'd find it hard to refuse after — ' but she just gave me a withering look and said, ' Don't be an idiot! ' "

Shu-lan was giggling again. " She needn't worry. You're no idiot," she chuckled and gave him a little push out of the door. " Poor mother! I'm afraid it was all a terrible shock."

Shu-lan smiled to herself as she carried the cold dishes of the first course and arranged them on the table. Then, in order to ask Mrs. Hu what she wished done about some of the sauces, she stepped lightly through Sunbeam's room to the doorway where she would catch the hostess' attention. Mrs. Chien, her back to the door, was talking. Shu-lan waited for a pause.

" Boys can look out for themselves," Mrs. Chien was saying, with the slight condescension of an older woman instructing a younger one, " but parents have to think twice these days before they settle on a husband for their daughter."

Mrs. Hu smiled sweetly. " I think the modern way has much to be said for it," she ventured to suggest.

Mrs. Chien was not to be interrupted. " I don't know much about that. But I know parents can't be too careful. Now take our Shu-lan. That's one thing her father and I will always be able to take pride in; we've found her a wonderful husband." She leaned over to whisk a speck of dust from the toe of her tiny shoe with her handkerchief.

Shu-lan, backing silently away from the door, caught Mrs. Hu's eye. What matter if her mother did claim the credit? The wonderful husband would be hers.

W. A. Ransford, Jr.
at the age of 18 months

"I was born on a farm about thirty miles from Topeka, Kansas. When I was eight the family moved to Topeka, with the express purpose of putting my sister and me into better schools.

"After college I taught for four years and worked for one year in the Kansas City Y.W.C.A. before leaving for China in 1917. I was made principal of Goodrich Girls' School at T'unghsien, fourteen miles east of Peking. On my first furlough I spent a term at Columbia University, and on the second furlough I finished the work for an M.A. in rural education. I am now 'dean' of the school, which has 425 students.

"In 1941 I started home, was caught in Manila when Pearl Harbor was attacked, and spent nearly two years there, living most of the time in the Presbyterian Mission Compound. There Dr. Robinson and Dr. Ballou and I wrote four books about Chinese school and hospital life, before we got the chance to leave Manila on the second *Gripsholm* exchange. We had to leave our manuscripts, and hardly dared to hope that we should ever see them again. But they were all saved by friends, both inside and outside the Santo Tomas internment camp.

"From 1943 to 1946 I worked in the Chinese division of the OWI in San Francisco, and later I taught Chinese at Yale University. As soon as the Japs surrendered, I prepared to return to China, and was the third American back at my station."

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